Interfaith Marriages and Negotiated Spaces

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Abstract

Discourse on inter-faith marriages in India at present involves diverse narratives ranging from opposition and resistance to acceptance. These alliances deserve greater focus in terms of their uniqueness, challenges, as well as everyday negotiations that form part of their lives. Based on narratives of respondents from Dhanak, an organization of inter-caste and inter-faith couples, this paper presents some domains of their lives and spaces being negotiated by them within their families. These domains include the issue of conversion, protecting identity, celebration of diversity and socialization of children, perceptions of themselves vis-à-vis other families and parental outlook towards the alliance.

Key words: interfaith; marriage; Special Marriage Act; love jihad; families; India; Hindus; Muslims

Introduction

An analysis of the trends of mixed marriages in India during 1981-2005 has shown that in terms of percentile, the number of marriages across lines of caste and faith had doubled during this period even while the absolute number of such marriages is not very large. The data from this study also indicated that marriages across faith were greater in urban areas, among those having higher education and those

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having a higher economic status (Goli, Singh & Sekher, 2013). Concomitantly, in terms of marriage preferences for the next generation, Robinson (2007) reports mixed and slow changes bordering ambiguity. Undoubtedly India is also a context where many couples crossing boundaries of faith have faced stiff resistance that has demanded intervention on the part of the highest judicial body with the Supreme Court seeking protection for such couples (Dasgupta, 2007). It is in the midst of these developments that the current paper positions itself where it explores the journey of inter-faith[3] couples in negotiating spaces within a context that is transitioning.

The paper begins with a discussion on changes in marriage practices in India especially in terms of self arranged marriages. The next section focuses on the inter-faith marriages and societal responses to these. A description of the methodology is followed by the findings related to negotiations and accommodations of inter-faith couples in the domains of marriage practices, conversion, protection of their identity, socialization of children, celebration of festivals and changes in perceptions related to inter-faith alliances. This is followed by conclusion.

Changing marriage trends in India

Marriage as a "structured and patterned set of social relations and practices" is "embedded in norms and values" of a society (Palriwala & Kaur, 2014, p.4). Review of literature on the subject in India reveals that Indian youth is appropriating globalization and structural changes in urban society by attaching new meanings. There is a growing evidence of valuing the economic potential, trustworthiness, equal temperament, physical look and intelligence of the prospective partner (Prakash & Singh, 2013). While these attributes are valued in the southern part of India as well, caste and community continue to reign supreme there. In an ethnographic study on the marriage system of the

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[3] The term 'inter-faith' is used instead of 'inter-religious' since it is perceived by authors as being more inclusive given the individuals/couples who may not consider themselves as following any particular religion.

Eighteen-Village Vattimas[4], Fuller & Narasimhan (2008) found that while endogamous marriage continued within the community, the mode of arrangement had changed with educational qualifications and employment of men and women, their potential happiness as congenial partners becoming the principal criteria for selection. Pande (2015) talks about how even in the practice of arranged marriages, some South Asian women are able to exercise agency while choosing their marriage partner. The researcher thus challenges the stereotype of the 'oppressed third world women'. Exploring preferences for arranged or love marriage, Derne[5] (2008) concludes that while men's assessment of arranged marriages has not changed much, there is a greater recognition of the validity of love marriage as a choice that people might make. Attempts are also made to reconcile the local and the global. In a research in Hyderabad, Gilbertson (2014) suggests that while people make an effort to adhere to local notions of respectable behavior that is considered central to their national identity, they also attempt to align themselves with the globally oriented ideas of progressiveness and open-mindedness. Therefore, while some studies have indicated that with industrialization and urbanization, there would be 'reduction in cultural diversity' (Ambirajan 2000), and changes in families and marriage practices[6] (e.g. love marriages replacing family arranged marriages); some other studies stated that family-arranged marriages have remained the dominant form of marriage and have not been replaced by 'love' or self arranged marriages in India (Jejeebhoy et al. 2013; Palriwala & Kaur 2014). However, changes are being evidenced in marriage practices and marriage preferences, and discussion on 'love' or 'self -

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[4] A Tamil Brahmin sub-caste

[5] Also, Derne (2005) in the backdrop of globalization leading to an explosion of media carried out a study with the young men film goers in their teens and 20's at two points of time (1991 & 2001) in Dehradun. Despite the transformed media landscape and the increased celebration of cosmopolitan lifestyles, the male respondents in Derne's study remained committed to arranged marriages. A 22 year old graduate quoted in this study states, "*Love marriages are only seen in films. In real life they are not possible*" (Derne 2005: 37).

[6] In 1968, Gore in his thesis titled, "Urbanisation and Family Change" had argued that the attributes of industrialization are likely to modify the traditional family in India, more so in the urban areas. One of the areas predicted for modification was secularization and individualistic philosophy. The system of education, popular fiction, serious literature, the press, the film and direct contact between persons (lay individuals) and socio-political leaders were to act as the medium of this change. Pothen (1974) in the study on Inter-Religious Marriages in Central India also opined that since the rate of industrialization, urbanization, literacy and social mobility is gradually increasing in India, the rate of inter-religious marriages is also likely to increase. The belief was that cities are likely to witness a greater trend of this nature as compared to villages.

arranged' marriages in India society is also increasingly becoming part of the discourse on marriages. This is evident through increasing literature on the love marriages, for example by Jejeebhoy & Halli (2005 cited by Jejeebhoy et. al 2013) and Palriwala & Kaur (2014). In their study across six states, Jejeebhoy et al. (2013) found two percent of respondents from northern and eastern states to be from self-arranged marriages while from the southern and western states, this figure was nine percent. Using data on married young women, their study aimed at exploring association between the kind of marriage arrangement (e.g. self arranged, family arranged, etc.) and marital relations and agency.

Although inter-faith and inter-caste marriages in urban areas may indicate a degree of diffusion of boundaries among people from different regions, faiths, caste groups, segregation and discrimination does continue to exist and influence opportunities and choices in terms of where one would or can live or work or operate business from (Jamil 2014). It is evident therefore, that a 'conscious social reform' is not the driving force behind changes in marriage norms (Kaur 2014: 19). At present, factors that influence prevalence of self-arranged marriages are diverse. For women, some of these factors are- higher level of education, location i.e. living in urban areas, higher economic status (Goli, Singh & Sekher 2013); changes in economic status or 'class transformations' (Kaur, 2014)[7]; opportunities created by globalization e.g. work in factories, need to overcome one's impoverishment (created by globalization), need to modify one's identity of being a young, poor and single woman, and access to the ideology of romance and individual choice (Lessinger 2014)[8]. It is important to note here that contrary to the finding that associates higher economic status with self-arranged marriages, Palriwala

[7]According to Kaur (2014) changes in economic status or 'class transformations' (with families becoming middle-class) also seem to be creating space for self-arranged marriages. Evidence for this is found in the Jat communities in Haryana as parents prefer education, employment and urban residence, and hence agree for such matches if caste and class criteria are also met.
[8]This is based on Lessinger's (2014) study conducted from 1991-92 in Chennai's garment factories. She notes how women with access to employment opportunities experience autonomy and various social relationships. She also views self-arranged marriages by women as their *self-assertion* considering their focus on fulfilling 'traditional' desires to get married and have children instead of sacrificing future for survival of parental family. However, it may not be necessary for these aspects to be applicable to women from other socio-economic strata or those from urban areas in other parts of the country at present.

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and Kaur (2014: 14), observe that self-arranged marriages are more frequent 'at the two opposite ends of the economic spectrum- the working and upper classes' although research on upper class is very limited in this area. Similarly, although higher level of education has been found to be linked with women's choice in their marriage (Goli et al. 2013; Jejeebhoy et al. 2013), this was not so for women in rural north India (Jeffery & Jeffery 1994). In the research by Jeffery and Jeffery among Jats in Bijnor district (in Uttar Pradesh), women respondents perceived little control over their involvement in marriage arrangements irrespective of being educated or illiterate[9]. Fieldwork for this research was however primarily done in 1982-83 and 1990-91. It is possible that level of education may be influencing assertion of choices in marriage as indicated in other studies.

Within the broad category of self-arranged marriages lie inter-faith marriages. For individuals who choose inter-faith marriage, love is their sole motivation and relationship is generally viewed in terms of individual compatibility (An-Na'im 2005). However, such marriages involving Hindus and Muslims are generally impacted by past experiences or 'the burden of the vexed history of Hindu-Muslim relations' as Chopra and Punwani (2005:50) call it. These past experiences also fuel fears among parents regarding the future of their children in inter-religious marriages. Examples of this have been presented by Ansari & Anjum (2013) in their study. Ansari & Anjum (2013) through their study also brought out that the mothers were more willing to accept their daughter's marriage outside community as compared to the fathers. In several cases in the study, fathers refused to talk about their daughter's marriage stating that they had nothing to do with their daughter's marriage. Also, in the qualitative study by Saheli (2007), some women were open to marrying their sons outside community but not the daughters. 5 out of 45 women who participated in this study were firmly against their children marrying outside community due *to 'fears of different traditions, customs, food habits, etc.'* (p. 71). Considering the perception of inter-faith marriages to be okay for males but not for females indicates

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[9]Jeffery and Jeffery (1994: 125) note that "rural women do not see education as something which liberates them, and that they do not necessarily see greater autonomy as desirable."

gendered responses of the society towards inter-community marriages which anyway often face resistance as discussed in more detail in the next section which brings up the aspect of women as symbols of honor and 'honor killings' as a one of the societal responses to inter-faith marriages.

Inter-faith marriages and societal response

India, as a country, has provisions for people to marry outside their communities without being forced to follow any one particular personal law in the process of marriage. Special Marriage Act, 1954 (i.e. SMA) ensures such a space to those who may belong to different faiths or communities and may want to opt for a civil marriage and marry without any religious rituals. While inter-faith couples have the option to use SMA to solemnize and register their marriage, they also face societal norms against their alliances that are sometimes labeled as immoral, unholy or acts based on lust (Ansari & Anjum 2013; Mody 2008). Response to such alliances may also go to the extent of killings (generally termed as 'honor killings') and ex-communication of individuals who attempt to cross their community's boundaries (Chowdhry 1997) as seen in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Delhi's rural belt. Although some of the Khap panchayats have relaxed marriage norms and one of the Khaps has also allowed inter-caste marriages (Kaur 2014)[10], we cannot overlook their past (and probably continued) emphasis on caste and kinship codes, imposing their own definition of justice, abetting violence and killings of couples (especially women) who deviate from the norm and choose self arranged marriages or alliances (Chowdhry 1997).

In fact the initial reactions of the parents and communities to inter-faith marriages could be understood using the normative model that explains families' patterned behavior (Broderick 1993). According to the normative model, family and society (as systems) follow the norm of self regulation. This self-

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[10]According to Kaur (2014), low sex-ratio (although it has improved now), bride shortage and sex-selective abortions of girls also seems to have contributed to relaxation of rigid marriage norms by some of the Khap panchayats in Haryana.

regulation takes place at three levels: at the level of individual who is socialized according to the societal norms and guilt is evoked in case of non-conformity; at the level of family and peers- who monitor conformity of individuals towards social norms and apply sanctions or punishments in case of any deviation; and at the level of society- which responds to deviations from accepted social norms by applying coercive measures and formal penalties (Broderick 1993).

Application of coercive measures and formal penalties is visible in many instances of the use of law against women who exercise the right to choose their partners in India (Baxi, Rai & Ali 2006). Parents, in their effort to deter such marriages are seen to use laws on abduction, rape and kidnapping, sometimes stating that the girl is underage (Baxi, Rai & Ali 2006; Mody 2008). Interfaith marriages, in the recent times, are also being opposed through targeted campaigns aimed at polarization of society on religious grounds. One such example is the campaign called 'Love Jihad' which is targeted at protecting Hindu girls from Muslim boys (ET Bureau 2014; Mishra 2014; Puniyani 2014). This campaign not only represents the patriarchal values where women are often symbols of the honor of their communities but also attempts to promote myths and stereotypes about one community (Muslim in this case). Mody (2008: 277) too notes that inter-community marriages involving Muslims are specifically targeted by Hindu nationalist groups[11]. A panel discussion[12] in Delhi criticized attempts that politicize the right of adults to choose their marriage partners. In this context it is pertinent to mention that the Supreme Court of India[13] and High Courts have stated that an adult is free to decide

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[11]Here, it is important to mention Radhakrishnan's (2004) argument that in India, globalization has resulted in changes (transmogrification as well) in religious and belief systems as well as shared norms but simultaneously there has also been an increase in the extremist and fundamentalist tendencies that hurt the pluralist nature of the country. She critiques fake sadhus, godmen and god women who trick people in India and outside India while globalization helps in increasing their wealth. Engagement of such people with politics, especially in view of 'hindutva politics' is perceived to be alarming and disastrous by Radhakrishnan for 'diversity of Hinduism and for minority religions' (p. 1408).

[12] A panel discussion on the Right to Choose and The Politics of 'Love Jihad' was held at Press Club, Raisina Road, on 22 August 2014. It was organized jointly by two organizations: Anhad and Dhanak

[13] For example, in Lata Singh vs State of U.P. [(2006) 5 SCC 475], the Supreme Court stated: "This is a free and democratic country, and once a person becomes a major he or she can marry whosoever he/she likes-If the parents of the boy or girl do not approve of such inter-caste or inter-religious marriage the maximum they can do is that they can cut off social relations with the son or the daughter, but they cannot give threats or commit or instigate acts of violence and cannot

whom to marry, and through which process, but without forced conversions (Arora 2014). The Supreme Court has also criticized the practice of khap/katta panchayats taking law into their own hands, e.g. in Arumugam Servai vs State of Tamil Nadu [reported in 2011, 6 SCC 405 cited by Arora 2014]. As evident from the discussion till now, law works for as well as against love marriages (Mody 2008). While legalization of marriage and intervention of Courts can offer safety to a couple, law can also be used by families to deter and break such marriages.

Being in minority, inter-faith marriages are often treated as a break from the norm or as special cases. It is not surprising therefore, that Mody (2008) uses the phrase 'not-community' while writing about couples who assert their choices in marriage. They are often forced out of their social groups and communities into a 'not-community', and as a group they themselves are not like a community in a conventional sense. At the same time, however, she concludes from her research on love marriages in Delhi that such categorization (of being 'not-community') may not apply considering various strategies that such couples, their families and communities use to re-draw, re-negotiate and manipulate boundaries of community in order to accommodate love marriages. She mentions how couples try to reintegrate themselves within families and communities, and how they make adjustments in terms of names, way of dressing up, and other behaviors[14]. In many ways, couples in inter-faith marriages[15] are then too a part of such a 'not-community' while re-negotiating and re-drawing boundaries with their families and communities. Inter-faith marriages also pose an ideological dilemma to different religious

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harass the person who undergoes such inter-caste or inter-religious marriage-direct that the administration/ police authorities throughout the country will see to it that if any boy or girl who is a major undergoes inter-caste or inter-religious marriage with a woman or man who is a major, the couple are not harassed by any one nor subjected to threats or acts of violence, and any one who gives such threats or harasses or commits acts of violence either himself or at his instigation, is taken to task by instituting criminal proceedings by the police against such persons and further stern action is taken against such persons as provided by law." (Arora, 2014)

[14]Mody (2008:276) also notes: *"..love-marriage couples are also dramatically redefining the parameters of 'Indian' morality and 'Indian' marriage. They do this not through open rebellion, but rather by transforming their own relationships and re-inscribing them within the terms which they hope are acceptable to their families and communities."*

[15] Dhanak, members from which are respondents for data presented in this paper, is an example of an organized group of such couples. It is, in away, also bringing the concept of belonging to a community into lives of some of these couples.

groups (Ansari & Anjum, 2013). On the one hand, different religions promote the philosophy of acceptance and concern for fellow human beings, and on the other hand, there is inflexibility in the process of marriage when one chooses to marry someone from a different religion without changing anyone's identity or faith.

Despite the stiff resistance, there is evidence that marriages across religion, caste or community have been taking place in the past as well as present. As shared in an earlier section of this paper, analysis of data on mixed marriages from a nation wide survey indicated that percentage of inter-caste and inter-faith marriages almost doubled between 1981-2005 (Goli, Singh & Sekher, 2013). From 1.6% in 1981, interfaith marriages were found to have increased to 2.7% in 2005. In Delhi, around 35 marriages are registered under SMA each year (Asif Iqbal from Dhanak, personal communication, 1 September 2014).

In a qualitative study[16] with 45 women (mostly from Delhi), Saheli (an NGO) found that 24 women (out of the 45) had married outside their religion/caste or community, and a significant number (25 out of 45) reported knowing inter-caste/community marriage in their family (Saheli, 2007).

Presence of inter-faith marriages in the context of societal resistance makes it imperative for us to understand such relationships with greater depth. Individuals choosing inter-faith marriages are aware that the society is likely to oppose. They sometimes or often live with the cost of their decision, in terms of being isolated and living with *'pain where parents have cut off or limited their interaction and not accepted the marriage or spouse.... .'* (Ansari & Anjum 2013: 155). They are also aware that in spite of legal and constitutional support to inter-faith marriages, institutions and stakeholders such as caste panchayats, police officers, lawyers and sometimes even judges *'uphold localized notions of sovereignty often in contravention of constitutional law and even of the rule of law'* (Baxi, Rai & Ali

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[16] The objective of this study by Saheli was to study the various ways in which religious, caste and community identity influences aspects of marriage such as choice of partner, relationships, and post marriage identity.

2006: 1239). Yet, such marriages do occur and are often sustained . This paper focuses on these couples and how they negotiate space for themselves - especially as a couple in relationship with their families. Negotiation in any relationship or any transaction is a process by which people compromise and seek mutually beneficial solutions. Understanding negotiations is important as it (instead of confrontation) has been found to be a preferred strategy even in lives of women who approach courts to seek rights and entitlements (Basu, 2014). It would be useful to see how this strategy is used by individuals in inter-faith marriages. The narratives from our study brought up themes not just on negotiations but also on resistance. These have been discussed in the findings.

Methodology

The data for this paper has been drawn from two sources. One source was members of Dhanak- a registered organization of inter-faith and inter-caste couples. Data was collected from five members of Dhanak through a questionnaire that was circulated in the E-group of Dhanak members in August 2014. Total five members chose to respond to the questionnaire. Since the data that was explored was of an intimate nature, it is possible that this factor deterred many from filling up the questionnaire. The issue explored from the Dhanak members was the nature of negotiation that was entailed on their part by virtue of entering into an inter-faith marriage at different stages of their life. Additionally their perception of how they saw their family as functioning differently from other families was also elicited. Apart from the responses to questions from these five members, data was also drawn from SAHAS 2014 document which is brought out annually by Dhanak and includes perspectives and experiences of its members. Findings shared in this paper are based on thematic analysis of data from these two sources. While presenting narratives from questionnaires in this paper, we have changed respondents' names to ensure anonymity. Wherever the narrative has been extracted from SAHAS 2014 document, we have used the same name that appears in the document and have mentioned the source.

Amongst the five respondents from Dhanak, three were female and two were male. Each of them is in a Hindu-Muslim marriage. Four of the respondents were from Muslim faith and one (a female) was a Hindu. The respondents and their spouse were of similar economic capacities before marriage (indicating no class difference). Their age ranged from 28 years to 42 years while period of their marriages ranged from 1.5 years to 14 years. Four had completed education up to post graduation while one had a graduate degree in a professional course. All of them were working, and belonged to families where both spouses were contributing financially through their incomes towards running of the household. All 5 respondents were north Indians belonging to urban areas. Parental families of two respondents were based in Delhi and of the other three in Uttar Pradesh. Four respondents of Dhanak were located in Delhi-NCR region and one in a different part of India at the time of this research. Except one who lived in a joint family, the other four were living as a nuclear family. Their total family income was in the range of 6 -20 lakh per annum. Each of these respondents was in interaction with their parental as well as in-laws' family at the time of this research. One of the respondents' marriage was solemnized through arya samaj wedding while marriage of the other four respondents had been solemnized under Special Marriage Act, 1954 (SMA). Two among these (with marriage solemnized under SMA) also went through religious wedding rituals after SMA. Although information about caste was not taken specifically from any respondent, it does not seem that it would have made any difference to the acceptance or rejection of their marriage.

Negotiating spaces

Negotiation is an important part of an inter faith marriage. Rafia, a Dhanak member who is living with her husband (a Hindu), mother in law and two sons, shared

"I feel that, though negotiations are present in all marriages, but in inter-faith marriages, they become a must….so that the expectations are not hurt every moment."

As suggested by Rafia, negotiation is a method that is used to deal with expectations and feelings associated with these expectations. This section presents narratives of respondents on the following themes: conversion; identities, negotiations and accommodations after marriage; celebration of diversity in family and socialization of children, how different or similar do couples in inter-faith families perceive themselves to be as compared to other couples; and changing perceptions in families vis a vis inter-faith marriages.

Marriage and the issue of conversion

If we look broadly at literature on inter-faith marriages by An-Naim (2005), Ansari and Anjum (2013), and Chopra and Punwani (2005), we note that while some couples opt for registered or civil marriage only, some get married through religious ceremonies and some opt for both- religious as well as civil marriages. Among those who opt for religious marriages, in some couples, the woman changes her faith according to the husband while in some (but smaller as compared to woman) the man converts. This process of faith change is generally accompanied by changes in the first name and/or the last name. Some (and generally in recent marriages) go through the process of conversion and religious marriages only for social acceptance or approval, especially by families and do not actually practice the other faith and do not use the changed names given in the marriage rituals. Among those who get married using SMA, largely each retains their identity and faith and continues to practice their religion as they did earlier. Regarding children of such couples, while in some families, children follow father's faith and culture (following patrilineality); some couples leave the choice of faith to children while giving them exposure to both sides.

In inter-faith marriages, negotiation is repetitive on the aspect of religion. For example, how marriages should be solemnized becomes a point of negotiation with parents as it generally involves the issue of conversion -even if done only as a ritual and not with the purpose of following the partner's religion. Sharing about the experience of accommodating all sides, Shaheen (a Dhanak member) states,

> *" [we] got married thrice, one as per each side and once under SMA. Since we consider our legal marriage as the original one, we made it sure that it happened prior to any of the religious ceremonies. We also held a small reception on our own (where the parents were also guests only) as a public declaration. Also, we celebrate our marriage anniversary on the day of our SMA marriage only.."*

This indicates that the couple values and celebrates civil or neutral form of marriage. That some couples agree to the combination of having more than one form of marriage with the purpose of seeking approval of families was also found to be true in the study by Ansari and Anjum (2013) as well. This aligns with Mody's (2008) observation that couples try to reintegrate themselves within families and communities and make adjustments in order to be accepted by families and communities.

However, reintegration may not happen in several cases. In their study, Ansari and Anjum (2013: 62-65) present biography of Ayesha, a Muslim woman who married a Bengali Hindu. They opted for a civil marriage and there was no conversion. She brought up her son as a Hindu. Her sister however married a Hindu man and her husband converted to Islam in this process. Their children, however, were reported as being 'misfits' in both communities.

Some couples reach an understanding with each other before sharing or negotiating with their respective families on the issue of marriage solemnization and conversion. Javed a Muslim man living with his wife (who is a Hindu) and a daughter, shares,

> *"The most important issue which was needed to be resolved was of conversion. While, our stand was clear that, though we respect each other's religion, neither of us is going to change it. From the perspective of girl's family it was a welcome thought. From my side [family] took time to accept. I personally feel that more than my intervention and negotiation, the clarity of non-negotiables like change of religion made it easier.*

Javed and his wife got married as per SMA 1954. This narrative suggests that once the issue of conversion is resolved by actually agreeing to not convert, this facilitates acceptance at least from family of the female, especially because of two aspects. One, the burden of adjustment generally falls on women (as discussed later in the next section) and hence parents of females are likely to be concerned about the kind of adjustments their daughter would have to make. Second, parents may also have some assumptions about the male, his culture and religious patterns that may affect their daughter. These aspects were visible in the narrative of father of a Dhanak member as he mentions (in Sahas document),

> *"Our immediate concern was to know about Azar's family as there is a general belief that Muslim families are quite conservative and put lots of restrictions on women. Though I am not at all very religious or ritualistic, I was worried about Tanya as she will be the one who will be going to Azar's family"* (Shekhar 2014: 13).

For some parents, however, religious differences do not pose as a great problem for the acceptance of a marital union. Parent (mother) of a son (a Dhanak member) who opted for interfaith marriage stated in the Sahas 2014 document, *"I have always felt that a sound relationship is based on understanding, love and respect for one another".* She added, "*Religion did not play an important role for me. Not even for a moment did I ponder that my son had wedded a 'Hindu' girl*" (Mathew 2014: 15).

Parents who do not focus much on religion or religious differences are, however, few. Even the difference in the above narratives of Shekhar and Mathew could be attributed to being a parent of a son or a daughter. In similarity with the findings of Saheli (2007), while a daughter's parent expressed concern, a son's parent expressed acceptance of inter-faith marriage. In such a scenario, communication and assertion of choices (especially about maintaining one's religious identity) with one's partner/spouse from beginning is seen to play an important role.

> *"I had decided and shared with my husband that I would like to continue using my name and religion as it is by birth……which was assured by my partner even to…my parents, who always shared that I shall have to follow that [religion] of theirs. But my partner has understood and kept due care of it. He had conveyed the same to his parents. Hence I never needed to negotiate for the same with them….it is clear to them…"* - Rekha.

Rekha's communication of her choices with her spouse is not surprising. Women with higher levels of education and economic independence do tend to negotiate better (An-Na'im 2005). In addition to this, Jejeebhoy et al. (2013), in their study across six states in India found that women in semi-arranged or self arranged marriages (as compared to family arranged marriages)had higher level of communication with their husband and were more likely to report agency in the following domains- decision making, freedom of movement, access to resources. In addition to this, as compared to those in family-arranged marriages, women in semi-arranged or self-arranged marriages were found to have higher levels of education, were economically better, were more likely to be living in the urban areas, and residing in a nuclear family. All these characteristics also match with female respondents from Dhanak in this research.

Looking at the processes of negotiation, the fact that narratives demonstrate the use of communication with each other in a relationship is evidence of changes in relationships - from hierarchical to more of

an equal one - as noted by Gilbertson (2014) as well through her research in Hyderabad from 2009-2010. Gilbertson (2014), however, also notes how the responsibility for balance and compromise in such companionate marriages yet seems to lie with women. Whether this is true for respondents from Dhanak requires another exploration of greater depth.

Overall, narratives in this section suggest that emphasis on conversion for marriage is one of the threats to identity of individuals in inter-faith marriage. While some convert under pressure, some by choice and some only in name but do not consider themselves to be of a new faith (An-Na'im 2005).Findings that emerge from Dhanak members' narratives are similar to Chopra and Punwani (2005) who, during 2002-2003 period, studied inter-faith marriages among Muslims in Mumbai covering 51 individuals including 25 couples. They examined how individuals in inter-faith marriages negotiated their religious and cultural identities. The respondents in their study faced varying degrees of opposition from families. Several opted for civil marriage along with the customary weddings and a significant number (23) did not consider conversion to be necessary. For most respondents who did convert nominally (i.e. performed the ritual only for sake of marriage) did not consider their identities to have changed, Among Dhanak members who were respondents for this study, conversion if any (e.g. in the process of nikah or hindu wedding) was only in name and did not affect identities of individuals. In addition to this, they seem to view civil marriage as a more significant wedding as compared to religious wedding -which may have been done only for sake of families. This is different from Ansari and Anjum's (2013) view that civil marriages are not considered as significant as the traditional or religious weddings. This difference (of observation by Ansari and Anjum , and respondents in this study) exists probably due to difference in the profile of the couples. While couples in Ansari and Anjum's study were largely those who were either in their middle age or old age, Dhanak respondents do not include any older person. Altered societal context may also be a contributing factor in terms of perception of civil vs traditional or customary marriage. The difference in observations is also probably linked with

how Dhanak positions itself on the issue of civil marriage. Dhanak promotes the idea of civil marriage instead of religious rituals (where one may need to convert) and has also been working towards making solemnization and registration process under the Special Marriage Act more people-friendly rather that being difficult for those opting for it[17].

Identities, negotiations and accommodations after marriage

While conversion as an issue related to one's identity is a point of negotiation before and at the time of marriage, a series of accommodations and negotiations continue later as well. Javed, Rekha and her husband(see narratives shared in previous section in this paper) seem to have asserted their choices from beginning, i.e. before marriage. But for some couples like Shaheen (a member of Dhanak) negotiations may happen gradually- being too accommodating in the beginning (e.g. agreeing for different processes of solemnization of marriage) to reaching a point of assertion later,

> *"Telling a straight 'NO' has helped more than continuing with unnecessary submissiveness and compromise. Initially we were accommodating everything and everyone under the burden of gaining acceptance."* -Shaheen

In alignment with the earlier narratives in this paper, this too indicates how 'accommodating' is used as a strategy to create acceptance and hence a space for self. However, this space for self may be perceived by one to be lost in the process of over-accommodation. Hence, like Shaheen (and her husband), one may feel the need to end the accommodation and assert one's own choices. Focusing on everyday resistance in lives of women, Jeffery and Jeffery (1994:162) in their study noted that, struggles by women generally focus more on changing their situation within the system and take the middle ground instead of challenging the whole system through 'confrontational insubordination'.

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[17] First author is aware about it being a member of Dhanak herself.

Shaheen's example, however, suggests sometimes improving one's own situation can include confrontational subordination as well.

Often, negotiations and accommodation post marriage involve the issue of identity and its expression in family. Shaheen shared,

> " [there is] *a constant struggle of hiding the partners religious identity within both families. Both set of parents, still try to avoid taking our legal names/names of partners' family members, in front of guests or neighbors. We try and ignore it completely but also make a point of establishing the same at every sizeable opportunity."*

Parents trying to hide an inter-faith marriage by avoiding the use of actual names of the couple should not come as a surprise. This is because, in urban areas, despite the increasing number of nuclear or small families, *"the ethos of the family continues to be characterized by 'jointedness'. There is a high value on being connected and the network of relationships is sustained across distances and changing aspirations, occupations and lifestyles"* (Tuli 2012: 83).

Hence, the need to sustain connections with others is likely to influence how a family behaves in front of relatives, neighbors and others in community. This, then necessitates protection of one's identity even in terms of names by inter-faith couples - who also manage such needs of their families in their own ways while they themselves attempt to sustain connections. As reflected in Shaheen's narrative, she asserts real identity of her husband and self whenever an opportunity arises. It is, however, not necessary that one would assert one's religious or cultural identity every time, especially within the couple.

> *"As an Individual I am not very protective for my religious/cultural identity, which I think has given me more openness and acceptability."*- Javed

Javed's narrative suggests how the effort to practice 'openness' may need to come with reduced or restricted assertion or protection of one's own religious or cultural identity. Javed also shared,

> *"..in case of having any family functions and gatherings there is an expectation to follow the rituals. In our case we accept it and follow it so it doesn't make much of a difference. Probably it would have been a different situation in case we would have reservations about it.*
>
> *Also the expectations / close watch from the relatives and family friends are there about how we manage things."*

In interfaith marriages, it is possible that such an assertion from the male partner or his family could make the other person uncomfortable, for example, as seen in Rafia's family from her mother-in law and in Zaheer's family - from his mother towards Shalini and children (see narratives shared below in this section). One also needs to see whether this strategy of restricted assertion of one's religious or cultural identity is used by women as well. According to Javed, both - he and his wife are flexible in terms of following rituals as per expectations of each others' families. This suggests how negotiations with families need not take place all the time. On some occasions, individuals in inter-faith marriages can also let go of their sense of control, not have reservations about each expectation of the families. It may be, however, possible for those in nuclear families to do this (as Javed is in one) as they would have much space to themselves, away from gaze of families. Although Javed mentions how there is a 'close watch' from relatives, things might have been different had he and his wife been living in a joint family system, as Rafia is.

Rafia who had an arya samaj wedding, a nikah and then a third wedding following hindu rituals, had to negotiate with the expectations of her mother-in-law in terms of what she should wear (she was expected to wear only sarees), use of *bindi*, what should be names of her sons (there was emphasis on

keeping Hindu names), observation of fasts, wishing others, etc. Rafia responded to these expectations by often taking the middle ground. For example, neutral names were selected for her sons. Her experiences also suggest how patriarchal values influence negotiations that take place in inter-faith families and how the burden of adjustment is likely to fall on women. The same was found in the study by Ansari and Anjum (2013) as well as in the studies shared in the book edited by An-Na'im (2005). Zaheer's narrative below also indicates how the kind of adjustments, and hence the extent or kind of negotiations, may be different for a man and a woman. In spite of initial resistance by Shalini's family, she as well as Zaheer seem to have been accepted without significant questions or interference. However, Shalini still faces challenges in being accepted the way she is by her in-laws' family and instead is expected to follow Islam- the religion that her husband and his family belong to.

"We gave very little room for our parents for taking decisions related to our life after our marriage. We first took a decision and informed them later about it.

There had been only one incident till date when I was taunted for my interfaith marriage from one of the relatives of my wife. I am extremely lucky that my parents-in-law are quite matured and understanding. All credits to Shalini who firmly handled the situation in her family. Although, they were against my marriage with Shalini and it took 2 years for us to establish regular contact with them but, after that it was smooth sailing for me. They never ever questioned me about my job or any marital dispute with Shalini. Shalini, on the contrary faced several challenges and she is still facing challenges from my parents due to her different faith. I talk to my parents on several occasions about our understanding of faith and related practices. But, they have strong perseverance and they are not ready to give-up their efforts (even 14 years after my marriage) for bringing Shalini, kids and me back to folds of Islam as per their understanding of

religion. So, we negotiated and are negotiating with my parents about the understanding and practices of religion.

Therefore, the issues and fears related to Islam keep cropping between Shalini and me and we debate, argue, and fight over them. Shalini has a genuine fear that my mother will try to influence our daughters in favor of her faith and teach them against other faiths. The fear is based on a recent incident where my mother used superstitious practices to manipulate our marriage. Therefore, Shalini is not ready to leave our daughters alone at their grandparent's home. I negotiate a lot with Shalini on this topic as the frequency of our visits to my parental home are increasing due to growing age and related dependence of my parents on us."

That Shalini and their children are expected to follow Islam is not surprising because expectations in terms of adjustment of woman in her husband's or in-laws' culture and assumption that children would follow father's religion or culture is not peculiar to inter-faith marriages- it does exist in other marriages as well.

Apart of differences in family's expectations from a man and a woman in an inter-faith marriage, this narrative brings up several other aspects. Zaheer and Shalini informed their families about their decision to get married after they themselves were sure of it. Keeping involvement of parents minimal may seem like a method of avoiding consistent negotiations. However, the narrative suggests how parents may not always keep their involvement minimal and may still try to influence as and when they can.

Another significant aspect that Zaheer's narrative indicates is connection of both -husband and wife with their respective parental family at the time of this research. This is true for all five respondents from Dhanak. Although maintaining contact with parental family can be assumed as a method of

resistance used by women to avoid or address constraints that they may face in their husband's family or community (Jeffery & Jeffery 1994), it can also be seen as an affirmation of integration with families, and ensuring support for self as well as for the parental family when needed (Grover 2009). For men, it is also likely to be linked with their responsibilities as sons towards their families, as expected in a patriarchal system. This too is evident in Zaheer's narrative shared above as following this responsibility and hence increasing family visits becomes a point of negotiation with Shalini. Although it is difficult to say that this would be only because of being in the role of a son because in Asian societies, the concept of intergenerational contract implies care of old parents by grown up children (Kabeer 2000).

In addition to this, it is important to note that we had started by looking at negotiation as something which achieves the middle ground (i.e. reach compromise and hence probably mutually beneficial) for the negotiating sides. However, the narratives here and in the last section suggest that negotiation is not always done or does not always achieve mutually beneficial solutions. Sometimes (or often) these negotiations aim to change or challenge perspectives of the other and seek solutions that may be more beneficial for one side that may have asserted more strongly or consistently. This is evident in the narratives presented in this paper. For example, Shaheen started saying 'no' although she accommodated a lot initially. Rekha (see previous section) maintained her stance of not changing her identity and ensured that this was agreed upon before her marriage. Along with process of negotiation, process of resistance is evident in interactions of inter-faith couples with their families. Narratives of women and men specifically reflect a scenario similar to Thapan's (2009: 170) observation of twin processes that are part of everyday lives of women- 'compliance and resistance, submission and rebellion' as they assert themselves and their identities. While compliance or submission is partly visible in the number of wedding rituals that an inter-faith couple agrees for, resistance and rebellion can be understood through efforts to protect one's identity in terms of one's religion or faith, and

exposure of children to both faiths instead of only the one followed by father. Presence of this resistance and assertion and hence one's agency is not surprising for this group of respondents as expression of agency has been found to be higher in self-arranged and semi-arranged marriages (Jejeebhoy et al. 2013).

Celebrating diversity and socialization of children

The kind of environment prevalent at home and the kind of messages that children receive about various religions or faiths is an important aspect of their socialization process. However, even when children may not be there, individuals in inter-faith families make attempts to set a culture that respects diverse faiths. Celebration of festivals of different faiths is a common aspect of inter-faith families of all five respondents from Dhanak.

> *"In my family we celebrate both the festivals… like we keep budgets for both …Diwali, Rakshabandhan, Holi etc and Eid etc...As we live separately [from parents] in a rented accommodation, we visit my partners family on the occasion of Eid and celebrate Eid and other festivals ...while my parent/ siblings come to my place on some occasions as per their feasibility ... We don't follow superstitious things…and just enjoy our present times wherever, whenever whatever way possible……we have lived and are living as humans…Keeping other issues aside..."* states Rekha living with her husband, who is a Muslim.

This celebration of different festivals generally happens in inter-faith families out of mutual respect for each other's faith (An-Na'im 2005). Chopra and Punwani (2005) too found in their study that there was

participation in each other's customs and festivals among individuals in inter-faith marriages in Mumbai.

In the families of respondents from Dhanak, an outlook of respecting diversity and communicating openly seems to have evolved and the same is encouraged among children as well. Zaheer emphasizes,

> *"We share and talk about every possible thing in and around our lives. The children are encouraged to be inquisitive."*

Javed also talked about exposure of his daughter to both religions.

> *"We got our marriage solemnized under SMA without conversion and are living happily. We have a daughter and she is getting exposure of both the religions."* - Javed

Among interfaith couples, there is a trend to

> *"...avoid branding their children with a specific religion because for them humanity is the essence of all religions. They prefer writing "others", "humanity'" or leaving the column blank while filling forms for birth certificate, education institutes, passport, etc. The attempt to dissociate their children from one specific religion till they attain maturity should not be mistaken as their dissociation from their respective religions after their marriage. It is rather an attempt to raise them with inclusive faith based practices and against religious biases and stereotypes."* (Iqbal 2014: 7)

This narrative emphasizes how Dhanak members tend to avoid deciding and naming religion of their children with the belief that children would be able to decide for themselves on reaching maturity. This, however, does not mean that parents, i.e. interfaith couple would not follow own faith or religion. Individuals in inter-faith marriage from Dhanak, as evident in earlier narratives in this paper, largely stay with their pre-marriage identities.

The common aspect in the narratives of Javed, Rekha and Zaheer is of ensuring exposure to diversity in upbringing of children. The narratives suggest respect for each other's faith, and expression of this respect and acceptance through celebration of festivals. One of the key indicators of this respect and acceptance is the emphasis on diversity and neutrality in socialization of children. Hence, instead of promoting one person's religion to be the primary one, couples were of the view that children need to be exposed to both sides and their religion or faith may not be chosen by parents for them. In the study by Ansari and Anjum (2013) too, quite a few couples were found to provide space to their children to experience religious practices and ideology from both sides. However, there were many couples where father's faith and culture prevailed in life of children. Whether or not this might happen in life of five respondents from Dhanak cannot be really predicted at present as none of them has a child near or above the age of 18.

Inter-faith families: how different or similar from others in functioning?

As evident from the narratives in earlier sections, the domains of negotiation in case of couples opting for inter-faith marriages are by and large in respect of how the marriage is to be performed, the identity of the partners post marriage, religious practices and socialization of children. The process of negotiation is a continuous one and there is diversity in the manner in which it is carried out. However, do these aspects make inter-faith marriages markedly different from other kinds of marriages? To understand this from perspective of such couples, respondents from Dhanak were asked about their view vis a vis functioning of their family as compared to others.

While some of the respondents from Dhanak view celebration of diverse festivals and a culture of non-discrimination as aspects that make their families different from others, some did not see themselves functioning too differently from others (i.e. those who were not in inter-faith marriages). Shaheen, who lives as a nuclear family with her husband, shared

"I don't think that my family functions any different compared to other families except that we have to get new clothes on more festivals than others. However, once the kids come in the scene, I feel that to some extent it will function differently as I would like my kids to be proud of and cherish the advantage of knowing two rather than one [religion/faith]. I hope this will inculcate a lot more consideration and sensibility in them.."

Although there is similarity with other Dhanak respondents in terms of exposure of children to both religions/faith, Shaheen's narrative indicates how she does not think of herself and her husband as a couple that is too different from others. In a way, according to her, inter-faith couples do not lead very different lives as compared to the other couples around them. Shaheen also shared,

"It's been 3 years since our marriage. Prior to that, we knew each other for 10 years. Since both of us belong to the same place in UP, there were no major differences in our general lifestyle and eating habits (had our eating habits been different, I don't think there would have been a relationship between us)"- Shaheen

This suggests that sustaining relationship as a couple in a nuclear household may require similar strategies and conditions as any other nuclear household, especially when individuals have a similar lifestyle and have known each other for several years (as in case of Shaheen).

For Javed, however, although the aspect of living in a nuclear family is similar to Shaheen's, there were also 'many new things' that they as a couple experienced.

"There is not much difference in the functioning of the family, if we see it as a nuclear family. (me, my wife and daughter). In our nuclear family we celebrate almost all the festivals, which is new for us also as we come across many new things." - Javed

Hence, although individuals in inter-faith families may have their own peculiar struggles, not every couple would see themselves to be too different as a family. This may also be because of the level of integration that these couples may have achieved with their respective families. Shaheen and Javed as well as others are connected with their families and therefore, may not see themselves to be too different from majority of families. Their every day life, then, may not seem to them too different from ordinary when one looks at their engagements in terms of visiting each others' families, celebrating festivals, managing own household as a nuclear family, bringing up children, etc.

Yet, inter-faith families face skepticism. Considering the extent of negotiations that a couple is involved in, it is not surprising that people assume there would be a conflict in such a marriage (Ansari & Anjum 2013: 15). Connecting findings from other studies and their own study, Ansari and Anjum (2013: 157) however state that in spite of stress and opposition that these marriages face, the divorce rate is low. In the context where divorce is stigmatized, respondents in their study shared that "...*the success of marriage is a compulsion to prove that their decision was not wrong. They understand that they will not be supported by parents/relatives. This also happens as they have a long lasting and deep understanding with each other, the strong bonding emerging from overcoming all hurdles together.*" (p. 157). Hence, post marriage support of families is a significant factor according to Ansari and Anjum. We are also aware that post marriage support to a woman generally varies with her choice of family arranged or self-arranged marriage (Grover 2009). Generally, support from one's parental family is limited or none after a self-arranged marriage. This has been reported by at least one of the respondents from Dhanak. However, even for those who shared greater involvement of parental families before and after marriage, their narratives reveal how issues of identity and expectations remain even if certain level of support exists.

Level of post marriage support, and the compulsion to prove that decision to marry was right- are both these factors linked with the strength of bond between an inter-faith couple? This needs to be studied further for Dhanak members. However, one can argue that individuals who exercise their right to choose a partner (whether or not from the same religion) are likely to work with the assumption that they need to make the relationship work. More than the aspect of 'compulsion' to make the relationship work, it may be a desire to make the relationship work and lead life as an 'ordinary' or 'normal' couple. This would probably contribute to less of an open rebellion by interfaith couples and more of transformations towards re-integration with families (as noted by Mody 2008 as well).The same seems to be largely true for respondents from Dhanak as well. Although one may have refused to fulfill certain expectations of the family, connection and interaction with families were sustained (even if this took some time post marriage).

Changing perceptions in families

As the process of negotiations attempt to redraw boundaries and expectations within families, some changes are inevitable. Families of inter-faith couples may have shown resistance to the alliance earlier and may continue to do so for a considerable period of time. However, continuous interactions are likely to facilitate change as evident in Javed's narrative.

> *"..both the families had certain pre-conceived notion/assumption about each other's religion, which we have not done anything consciously to break it. Many assumptions that were generic had been now broken down on their own by mere interactions and discussions."*- Javed

According to Rafia, the experience with an inter-faith marriage made both families more open towards inter-faith marriages.

"Now our family is open towards marriages in different/other faiths……. Love marriages are not denied as it used to be earlier. Now, our parents have started accepting inter faith marriages if the match is perfect otherwise." - Rafia

How parents respond to their adult children exercising the right to choose (their partners) and opting for an inter-faith marriage is deeply influenced by what they think and believe. All parents have some culturally shared ideas about the important aspects in life of children and their rearing (Tuli 2012). However, there is heterogeneity among parents in terms of these beliefs and '*what is adaptive and how it is attained will differ on the basis of their personal experiences'* (Rosenthal & Roer-Strier 2006 cited by Tuli 2012). That there have been changes in parents' perspective based on their personal experiences within the family (due to presence of an inter-faith couple), is evident from Javed's and Rafia's narrative. This suggests that if couples and their families continue to interact, this may pave the way for gradual changes in the level of resistance and outlook towards inter-faith marriages and their son-in-law/daughter-in-law who comes from a different cultural background. Interactions, as the narratives indicate, offer opportunities to challenge assumptions of parents about the other religion/faith and its practices. Hence, it becomes possible for people to respect diversity. This is true not just for parents but also the individuals in inter-faith marriage as found in the study by Saheli as one of their respondents shared,

"I am more sensitized towards and aware of the problems faced by minorities, their psyche, insecurities and fears. Also, convincing my family and extended family gives me hope that by opening up dialogue and with persistence one can reduce the impact of rising communalism in society. Because of my marriage, some of us couples who have married outside our religion or community, have come together and are trying to

understand the complexities of issues involved in such marriages." (Hindu Punjabi woman married to a Syrian Christian - Saheli 2007: 60)

Hence, inter-faith marriages have the potential to build a strong base for community level changes towards greater sensitivity and acceptance vis a vis different faiths/religions. Focusing on marriages between castes and communities, Mody (2008: 1) also states that '*a study of such marriages could reveal important dynamics of social change*'. Ansari and Anjum (2013: 16) believe that these marriages reflect the 'genuine extent of heterogeneity' in a society, promote pluralism and diminish 'ideological monopoly' of different religions. This seems to be validated by the above narratives.

Conclusion

This paper presented narratives of urban, middle class, educated respondents from inter-faith marriage. These respondents shared their experiences and perspectives in terms of the themes of negotiations in their families and (whether and) how they considered their families to be functioning different as compared to others. What emerges from various narratives is presence of processes of not just negotiation but also of assertion, resistance, acceptance and change while sustaining connections with their families. The gender dimension in these processes was evident from the way narratives of women largely indicated expectations that they were expected to fulfill while narratives of men indicated mixed experiences. While for one male respondent (Zaheer) whose marriage faced strong opposition initially, the present experience was of being accepted by his spouse's family. However, for the second one (Javed), while initial experience (at the time of marriage) was of being accepted by both sides, present experience is of 'close watch' in terms of how the couple is leading their lives and expectations in terms of following religious rituals at times.

In alignment with Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim (2005), we also believe that though inter-faith marriages are often understood in terms of testing social boundaries, they are actually a measure of social

distance, and a prism to understand relationships among different religious groups or communities. Inter-faith families, from our perspective, offer opportunities to challenge stereotypes, break divides and help people accept diversity (though gradually). The scenario for these families would gradually change and is hopefully changing. Initiatives such as Pratibimb Mishra Vivah Mandal[18], Dhanak, Chayan[19], Love Commandoes[20] are few examples of efforts that align with the ideology of right to choice in relationships and eliminating the divides of caste and religion. The need for further research, however, remains. Inter -faith marriages do need to be further understood with their own peculiarities as well as similarities that they share with other kinds of families. Considering connections of nuclear families (of inter-faith couples) with their larger families, we need further exploration on patterns in life of those who live as a nuclear household and those who live with a set of parents and hence in a joint household. Additionally, Ansari and Anjum (2013) emphasize on the need for research on experiences of not only inter-faith couples, but also their parents and children- which too would be a useful exploration.

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[18] It is a bureau, which helps people in seeking and exploring inter-caste alliances. More information is available at : http://www.pratibimb.info/
[19] A network of organizations who believe in right to choice of people vis a vis their partners and relationships.
[20] An organization that protects couples and facilitate their marriage in cases where there might be threat to life

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