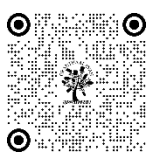


# MATRIMONIAL MARKET DYNAMICS IN KERALA: A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE ADVANCEMENT OF MATRIMONIAL ADVERTISEMENTS IN KERALA

Sarath Krishna A. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ph. D. Research Scholar, Department of English, TKM College of Arts and Science, Kollam, Kerala, India



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## ABSTRACT

Marriage, as a social institution is prevalent in the cultural landscape of Kerala. The cultural diversity of Kerala can be observed from its heterogeneity in customs, rituals and practices. 'Arranged marriages' are the traditional and most common kind of marriage that happen in Kerala. These marriages are generally facilitated through matrimonial advertisements which commodify the institution of marriage itself. They also serve as spaces of segregation on the basis of religion, caste, class and gender. The normalisation of conventions takes place through such advertisements which is being catered to the general public through newspapers, matrimonial websites, television channels and social media platforms. It seems that even the tastes and important life choices of individuals are shaped on the terms dictated by the culture industry. The paper studies the evolution of matrimonial advertisements with respect to the sociocultural transformations that happened in the Kerala society. The study aims to analyse the process of evolution from the era of marriage brokers and marriage bureaus to the era of social media and dating platforms. It also identifies the point of rupture in this evolutionary process which can be considered as a harbinger of progressive change in the sociocultural landscape of Kerala.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Culture, Matrimonial advertisements, Commodification, Culture Industry

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage, as an essential social institution, is prevalent in nearly every culture, and the cultural landscape of Kerala represents a clear example of this trend. Marriage is defined as the approved social pattern by which two or more people form a family (Horton & Hunt, 2007). The institution of marriage within Kerala is characterized by distinctive traditions and customs that epitomise the state's extensive cultural and social heterogeneity. Although matrimonial practices may differ based on determinants such as religion, community affiliation, and socioeconomic standing, there exist numerous commonalities and prevailing trends in the state's matrimonial conventions. In the region of Kerala, just like many other areas in India, matrimonial unions are predominantly facilitated through religious practices. The concept of endogamy is regarded as the 'appropriate' approach, and individuals are actively encouraged to adhere to this practice. Marriage plays a pivotal role as a cultural practice. It has been significantly commodified in the contemporary society, and it is facilitated mainly by the means of advertisements.

Advertisements, as a cultural artefact, can be considered as integral part of contemporary popular culture. They provide an intriguing framework for the analysis of the values, beliefs, and social dynamics of a specific time and place.

They not only represent the commodities being marketed but also embody the cultural, social, and economic environments from which they emerge. Advertisements encapsulate prevailing societal trends, preferences, and anxieties, making them excellent sources for understanding a particular culture. In the existing social framework, every aspect of life is presented through advertisements. Dr. Rishika Sharma observes in her research paper “Interrelation between Culture and Advertising Art”:

Advertising is part of the glue that holds our culture together. It allows us to share a common experience in a landscape populated (for better or worse) by brands, images, logos, and even silly jingles. Advertising shapes our cultural values and the other side is also true; the cultural values shape up our advertising. In fact, both inter-act with each other. I assess the case for the advertising as a positive force in our society by looking its cultural aspects.

In the global marketplace, advertisements play a prominent role in the promotion and circulation of products. The wide spectrum of products ranges from consumables and services to even the intricate process of selecting life partners as well.

The institution of marriage provides legal validation and social recognition to cohabitation within the community. In the context of India, marriage not only represents a relationship between two individuals but also an alliance between two families. Marriages in India generally happen in an ‘arranged’ way wherein the families identify suitable bride and groom, and thereby establishing a matrimonial alliance. This practice, referred to as arranged marriage, which has been a part of Indian tradition since time immemorial is now a dominant social convention.

This paper analyses the role of matrimonial advertisements in the sociocultural context of Kerala. It is important to study the evolution of matrimonial advertisements and the changes it underwent during the course of time. The paper also tries to study how the sociocultural changes occurred in Kerala affected these advertisements without undermining their impact among the common public.

## 2. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Matrimonial advertisements serve as an easy mechanism to facilitate arranged marriages. Through such advertisements, families are able to present their ‘products’ in the matrimonial marketplace, highlighting their distinct attributes while also selecting the most favourable options available. The process of commodification transpires at multiple levels- individuals (regardless of their gender), their values and attributes, as well as cultural practices and conventions. Marriage is presented as a commodity, and it encompasses all the related commodities also.

The common feature of the majority of matrimonial advertisements is that these advertisements seek people belonging to the same community. The foundational elements of these advertisements are predominantly rooted in religion and caste. Other factors such as educational attainment, professional status, skin complexion, height, and weight carry a secondary status. Historically, newspapers have served as the principal medium for matrimonial advertisements. In conjunction with newspapers, matrimonial websites and applications have emerged. Whereas individuals previously relied solely on newspapers, matrimonial websites have now assumed a prominent role in this context. There exist specialized websites for different religious and caste groups.

Considering that newspapers served as the primary disseminators of matrimonial advertisements, individuals have been conditioned to engage with these advertisements from an early age. Newspapers always had a persuasive power as the public's viewpoints on various matters are influenced and shaped by their content. Consequently, an advertisement seeking a ‘fair-skinned, good-mannered, devotional, and affluent Nair girl’ does not appear problematic within the collective consciousness of the society.

In earlier periods, matrimonial arrangements in Kerala were facilitated through marriage brokers. These brokers assisted individuals in identifying suitable matches from a list of available candidates. P M Sureshkumar, in his research paper “Professions in Transition: A Case of Marriage Brokers” says, “The marriage brokers in Kerala are a distinct category of professionals with less of formal recognition, yet most indispensable and much sought after. Educationally humble, their paraphernalia was a customary handbook containing a bunch of profiles and an astrological ready reckoner.”

However, with the growing popularity of matrimonial advertisements in newspapers, the significance of these brokers has waned, as newspapers cater to a broader audience. Newspapers still continue to maintain a substantial presence as a medium for matrimonial advertisements. Following the emergence of the internet, matrimonial websites

gained prominence. These platforms are specifically designed for matchmaking purposes. Matrimonial websites offer several advantages in comparison to newspapers; they not only display advertisements but also serve as an intermediary between the two parties, and they provide an interface to communicate as well. This gradual change and the rising importance of matrimonial websites are evident from the words of P M Suresh Kumar:

The role of intermediary persons, otherwise called as marriage brokers gradually shifted to institution-based services, often termed as bureaus. This persisted for some time. The advancement of technology contributed to the introduction of online platforms. Sophisticated search options, system-generated reminders, personal tele-caller assistance, and extended services gave an edge over conventional institutional services.

The rising popularity of these websites has prompted several newspapers to establish their own matchmaking websites, such as m4marry.com by Malayala Manorama.

All of these matchmakers—brokers, newspapers, and matrimonial websites—are unified by a shared adherence to established conventions. This validates the proposition put forward by Adorno and Horkheimer that the culture industry manufactures products which are uniform in nature. This homogenous nature can be observed in matrimonial advertisement platforms as well. The individuals and cultural practices are commodified, and they are transformed into passive consumers by the industry (Horkheimer et al., 1973). The culture industry has successfully engendered a false consciousness within the societal framework through the dissemination of prevailing ideologies. The culture industry effectively dictates the needs and desires of society.

Advertisements promote marriage as a commodity by giving emphasis to material possessions. It is indeed paradoxical that religious institutions, which assert that marriages are ordained in heaven, commodify this 'heavenly' institution for financial gain while simultaneously perpetuating and sustaining social hierarchies. Moreover, matrimonial advertisements highlight caste-based preferences, reinforcing hierarchical structures. They also project class markers such as occupation and income to perpetuate class distinctions. Women are often depicted as home makers, reinforcing patriarchal norms.

Amidst these platforms that promote conventional practices emerged a novel space that can be accurately characterized as a rupture: dating platforms. It was new to the social fabric of Kerala While individuals may have engaged in dating practices in the past, it was never formally integrated into the cultural norms. The introduction of dating applications such as Tinder, Boo, Bumble, and OkCupid, among others, has created a vital new avenue for the youth to seek companionship. The acceptance of dating platforms among the youth has paved the way for the rise of dating applications even in Malayalam, the local language. Numerous dedicated dating apps in Malayalam have emerged, including Arike, Koode, Mizhi, and others.

The advertisements of these new dating platforms try to present such applications as an alternative to the conventional matrimonial websites. They oversee the higher purpose of bringing about a change in the contemporary society. It seems that the industry wants to maintain the status quo for their vested interests. It is really saddening that even when the people of a society try to embrace a change, the culture industry is dictating its own terms as it always did.

But the disruption instigated by these dating applications has been further complemented by social media platforms. This phenomenon can accurately be regarded as a defining moment in the cultural landscape of Kerala. It represents a juncture at which the current generation diverges from age-old conventions and practices. But the fact that vast majority of the marriages happening in Kerala are mediated by various religious institutions proves to be a hindrance in rejecting all the conventions. Most of the religious groups run their own matrimonial websites. The fact that the present generation is more progressive and receptive than the older ones remain as the only ray of hope to free the society from the clutches of conventions and orthodoxy.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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