**Remediating the Matchmaker: Arranging Marriage Online in the South Asian Diaspora in America**

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The topic of marriage is a major focus of conversations about the “modernization” of South Asian culture in the face of social processes that fall under the vague and multivalent concept of globalization.[[1]](#footnote-1) This chapter seeks to destabilize various assumptions about the contemporary status of marriage in a globalized world by focusing on the role of matrimonial websites in the lives of diasporic South Asians in New Jersey and New York. In what follows, we acknowledge how “tradition” and “modernity” coexist and coincide in the South Asian diaspora in the United States with regards to the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to pursue intimacy, love, and marriage.

Globalization is often thought of in terms of global flows of capital. But when one takes note of the forms of capital that flow in a globalized world – money, products, labor, specialized knowledge, it is hard to ignore the role of humans in these transnational flows. As subjects migrate and reimagine space, ICTs impact the maintenance of family and other social ties, cultural production and consumption, and pursuit of intimacy, love, and marriage for members of the South Asian diaspora. In addition to using ICTs to maintain local and national ties, South Asians on the Indian subcontinent and in the diaspora also use ICTs to seek out information and communication on a transnational scale, creating transnational ethnoscapes, technoscapes, and mediascapes, a dynamic interplay between people, technology, and audio/visual media.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This chapter distinguishes itself among other studies of contemporary arranged marriage amongst South Asians by focusing on the practices of U.S. diasporic South Asians and by acknowledging the many actors – human and non-human – that factor into the arranged marriage process amongst this social group. In what follows, we use the term “South Asian diaspora,” even though the subjects in the study are of Indian descent. Though there are small regional differences in marriage practices between villages, cities, nations, regions, and religious and ethnic groups, the coeval existence of arranged and love marriages, matchmakers and Internet sites is standard for many across the region and its diaspora.

**Marriage in the South Asian Diaspora: Arrangements, Assisting, and Love**

Within South Asia and the South Asian diaspora, marriages are popularly conceived in one of two genres: the arranged marriage or the love marriage. In this formulation, love marriages are tied to modernity, or, alternatively, to “Western culture.” This kind of analysis may or may not acknowledge that in the West, love became a priority in the pursuit of marriages only in the eighteenth century.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the West, tying love marriages to modernity has led to representations of arranged marriages as old-fashioned or outdated. These perspectives ignored reasons why arranged marriages existed. Speaking of the cultural conditions that shape arranged marriage in the Indian context, Seth and Patnayakuni commented,

From a very young age, children are socialized to identify with the family as a whole and discouraged from developing an autonomous self. They are conditioned to place the interests of the family ahead of their own. Alienating and confronting parents and family is still an anathema to most young people, especially in important decisions such as career selection and marriage. Furthermore, cultural mores frown upon the socialization among men and women in the form of dating and relationships. As a result, arranged marriage is still the dominant way for families and individuals to find partners for marriage.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This formulation did not account for the many ways that transnational migration and diasporic subjectivity impact marriage configurations. Seth and Patnayakuni later acknowledged,

over the past several decades, social and geographical mobility have weakened the extended family structure and increasingly replaced it with a more nuclear family structure. As a consequence, social networks provided by the extended family structure are no longer available to parents for finding suitable partners for their marriageable offspring. [[5]](#footnote-5)

Here, Seth and Patnayakuni have argued that these factors had made online matrimonial sites ever more popular from within the educated (diasporic) middle class. Although love and arranged marriages have been popular classifications from within the South Asian context, this dichotomy simplified the processes that lead to each of these marriages. Especially in families with transnational networks or the possibility of transnational networks, assisted marriages are popular. In assisted marriages,

the parents/kin arrange for a set of prospective spouses based on criteria around religion, caste, education, occupation, age, and geography, among others. They find socially acceptable ways to introduce their children. These may be through large family get togethers, weddings, and other social or cultural events.[[6]](#footnote-6)

As is implied in this quote, assisted marriages are sometimes based on transnational networks of sociality that have pre-existed, but sometimes trusted consultants like matchmakers or astrologers are consulted[[7]](#footnote-7) or matrimonial sites are used[[8]](#footnote-8) to start or expand the search. Parents who participate in assisted marriages “allow[ ] their sons and daughters choice among nominees screened for caste, lineage, and geography, among other measures – and giv[e] the children veto power.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

There are many contexts where dating and love marriages, arranged marriages, and assisted marriages all coexist as potentials and possibilities for members of the South Asian diaspora. These coeval possibilities and potentialities have the ability to be configured in different ways by members of the same community, caste, or regional ancestry or even within the same person. The diverse courtship practices can also play a role in marking nationality, as noted by Marian Aguiar:

The meaning of [India] is not a given, nor is it identical across different historical-geographical locations. Arranged marriage might become a way to ‘be Indian’ for a highly educated, professional man in New Jersey, and it might become a way to ‘be Bangladeshi’ for a woman from East London working in a garment factory, but these forms of imagining the nation are mediated by the structures of gender, class, and religion.[[10]](#footnote-10)

What is left unsaid in this quote is that in certain situations, pursuing configurations other than arranged marriages may also be tied up in national or diasporic identity, how one’s real possibilities for both arranged and love marriages may indicate a way of being diasporic.

This paper considers the ways that the model of the arranged marriage as a model or an option coexists, coincides, and informs various other pursuits of relationships for members of the South Asian diaspora. While “dating violates the traditional Indian understanding of sexuality as something to be encountered only in marriage,”[[11]](#footnote-11) various Indian nationals and members of the diaspora, against tradition, see dating as a possibility. It is indisputable, for instance, that contemporary youth on the subcontinent have more exposure to the possibility of dating,[[12]](#footnote-12) but other configurations of these possibilities exist amongst many members of the South Asian diaspora. While transnational migration is certainly facilitated by these sites[[13]](#footnote-13) (and, in fact, sites like Shaadi.com have developed strategic business partners that help with issues around immigration), the subjects interviewed for this chapter are citizens of the United States who, for the most part, focused on finding other Americans for reasons explored in the analysis of our interviews.

In a study of use of the Internet that related specifically to South Asian diasporic identity, Adams and Ghose have found that South Asian matrimonial sites, rather than focusing on photographs of the eligible subject, include more information related to “caste, religion, ethnicity, education and employment, which are considered by families to be of greater relevance to marital happiness than physical appearance.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Various studies have pointed out that the desirability of light-skinned mates has led to pursuits of romance that emphasized skin color and caste and either misreported[[15]](#footnote-15) or omitted data[[16]](#footnote-16) that would be unattractive.

**Methods**

The aim of this study was to understand the motivations and practices of diasporic South Asians when it came to the use of computer-mediated platforms for courtship. The subjects for this study were recruited by one of the researchers from within the New Jersey/New York South Asian community of which she is a part.[[17]](#footnote-17) The total South Asian diaspora in the U.S. is overwhelmingly comprised of individuals with reported ancestry from India (80%), and the rest from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives.[[18]](#footnote-18) According to the 2010 US Census, the New York Metro area[[19]](#footnote-19) has the largest number of residents identifying as Asian Indians, with over 500,000 counted.[[20]](#footnote-20) Starting from a sample of two previously known contacts, the sample expanded using snowball sampling to total ten overall subjects.

Participants were selected if they were a diasporic South Asian living in New York or New Jersey and had any first hand experience creating a profile on any dating website or matrimonial website. Dating websites allow users to search and contact individuals through filters, and offer suggestions potential communication often with the intention to set up a physical meeting. Matrimonial websites offer a similar functionality, however, they do so with the clear intention that all communication is in the service of pursuing marriage. All of the participants in the study have either used or witnessed the first hand experience of the South Asian-specific matrimonial site Shaadi.com[[21]](#footnote-21) or one of its subsidiaries for specific South Asian ethnicities (e.g. GujaratMatrimony.com, where all users are from or have family from the state of Gujarat). The popular dating sites Match.com and eHarmony.com used by our participants are mass-marketed to American users as sites without any ethnic identification (though eHarmony.com was started by a Christian psychologist and theologian). All sites allow browsing to be based on geographic proximity.

Interviews followed a guide that was developed to learn the tactics users employed and purposes they had when creating profiles on both dating and matrimonial sites. The guide also allowed users to talk about the many different sites they used (if applicable). During interviews, special attention was made to understand the types of interaction and communication pursued and enacted on each website that they used.

After interviews, subjects were asked if they knew any South Asians in the area who used matrimonial or dating sites. All interviews were done in person or over Skype in early 2014. From the ten subjects, who ranged from 26 to 35 years old, three were male, and seven were female. Most conversations were about heterosexual courtship, although one subject self-identified as bisexual. Of the men, two were born in the US and one was born in India; of the women, five were born in the US and two were born in India. All seven subjects born in the US are first-generation Americans. Their religious affiliations, which included Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain, were revealed over the course of interviews as it became important for their courtship practices. All subjects have ethnic ties to North India; they sometimes brought up their regional ethnicities when those ethnicities played a factor in the pursuit of mates. Our subjects’ steady access to high-speed Internet at home and on their mobile phones were trappings of their presumed membership within the American middle class. We coded each interview subject with a number, which was used throughout to identify different subjects. A list of subjects with age, gender, birth country, and religion, when provided, is provided in the Appendix. Interviews were transcribed and coded based on themes that emerged, some of which are explored below.

In the analysis that follows, we hope to reveal our findings that the various actors that have existed in the South Asian matchmaking process before the Internet – young people, their parents and other relatives, matchmakers, astrologers, biodata – have been remediated by various digital tools. Here, we borrow the term “remediation” from critics of digital aesthetic forms Bolter and Grusin to note the ways that, new media forms, in this case matrimonial sites and dating websites, transmute previous forms into something somehow experienced in a both more immediate and more hypermediated way.[[22]](#footnote-22) In other words, with the digital remediation of matchmaking processes, users are more aware of both the process and structure of the mediated practice.

Before we provide our analyses of the interviews at the center of the chapter, we first take a detour to a hotel and conference center in Edison, New Jersey.

**Spectacular Matchmaking in Edison, New Jersey**

Traditionally, arranged marriages in India are brokered by matchmakers, or *nayans*, who serve as community scouts and neutral liaisons organizing communications between families, with little or no input from the eligible individuals themselves.[[23]](#footnote-23) Though matchmakers may be friends or extended family members, professional matchmakers have played a historical role in Indian society aligning families according to wealth, property, caste, religion, and social status. Today, newspaper advertisements, informal biodata (demographic information) profile circulation, matrimonial websites and matchmaking cultural events have also entered this space as the South Asian diaspora reimagines courtship practices. The various methods of matchmaking each allows for various configurations of individual autonomy and cultural expectations.

In 1995, a non-profit organization called Matri was founded by Yashvant Patel to assist Gujarati eligibles in New Jersey in their quest to find "life partners" that spoke Gujarati and shared common cultural values. At its inception, Matri focused on organizing annual conventions where hundreds of prospective brides, grooms and their parents across the U.S. gathered in business casual attire for a weekend of food, music, and dance as well as other social events that allowed people looking for marriage partners to meet each other. Before arriving at the annual convention, registered participants were asked to select the names of five prospects they would like to meet from a booklet of colored photographs and biodata profiles. At the event, participants were asked to walk on stage, share their name, registration number, and a brief introduction in 40 seconds or less. Afterwards, parents moved to a separate area for a parents meeting guided by adult volunteers, and young participants are broken up into groups for individual interviews.

Since then, attendance at Matri has expanded and the organization itself has grown to include local chapters in areas across the country with a high density of Gujarati Americans. Matri has also forged a partnership with GujaratiMatrimony.com, a subsidiary of Bharatmatrimony.com, the profitable Indian matrimonial website and self-proclaimed “trusted partner in marriage.” As Patel boasts in a video interview embedded on GujaratiMatrimony.com, users of the website have been able to “connect to millions of Gujaratis worldwide.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Not only has this organization drawn a sponsor facilitating entrance into the digital space, but the annual events have also been revamped to include a “speed dating” session. Here we find that matrimonial sites such as Matri are remediations of older forms of arrangement practices that now coexist in complex systems of matchmaking.

**Remediating the Matchmaker**

Following the lead of actor-network theory,[[25]](#footnote-25) in addition to noting the cultural forces of diaspora, immigration, and the transnational, we should be attuned to the various human and non-human actors involved in matchmaking. We have identified the eligible young people, their parents and family, matchmakers, astrologists, dating and matrimonial sites, online profiles, and social matching algorithms as key actors within the system of South Asian diasporiccourtship. All of these actors have the capability to be considered matchmakers. If hybrid forms like assisted marriages are becoming popular for diasporic subjects, then what roles do these actors in arrangement play in various forms of courtship pursuit in the South Asian diasporic context? In answering this question, it is important to note that all ten subjects saw themselves as the primary agents in their pursuit of partners or dates.

Speaking about the interface of the site Indiandating.com, not a matrimonial site but an ethnic dating site, Participant 1 noted that the site and its database of users seemed more “traditional.”

RAJA: So what do you mean by more traditional?

PARTICIPANT 1: The questions they ask, they ask about caste. It was all voluntary. They were asking about things that I didn’t even know what it was like um...I mean...subcaste and...“manglik”[[26]](#footnote-26) or something like that. Is that something?

R: Is that astrology?

P1: Yeah. So they ask about that. It was kind of funny because there’s a feature like a special feature where you had to pay more to see it. It seemed like they put a lot of weight on that. But like I don’t really care about that stuff [chuckle]...But yeah, it has like a piece of paper that is covered and there is a little piece that is turned up. So it is like hidden, but if you pay more then you can see what is underneath. Maybe that’s what they do at matchmakers [sic] in India…I don’t know.

Though this is a direct example of remediation, in which the role of the astrologer has been digitized onto a matrimonial site. The role of the astrologer was one that was seen as irrelevant for the kinds of pursuits our subjects were engaged in.

People dedicating themselves to matchmaking were rarely mentioned as specific actors in the courtship practices of those interviewed. When asked about how sites could better meet their own specific needs, Participant 10 wished that the role of a human matchmaker was more a part of the websites he used,

I think someone from the website should interview new members and take notes to get to know a person...almost like a coverage person for them. I envision it being someone who doesn’t keep in touch with you but someone that covers your profile. They would have a brief conversation with you when you join the site or at the period of time you request just to get a sense of who you are. Maybe they could even record a Q&A and then put it on the profile with the customer’s approval. And that person through other conversations could match up people rather than just relying on an algorithm. I know there are people in real life that do this. I like the big audience of Match, they would have to have someone to do it for a specialized group which is a high cost but also a smaller pool. Like in the traditional sense like an Indian matchmaker. I know this would cost more but augmenting the site with humans would result in more matches. Websites should be merely for introduction and they shouldn’t position themselves as a wedding connector basically. [emphasis added]

Later on, this subject said that he did not fill out the horoscope portions of the site because “he didn’t place weight on [it].” Though his courtship pursuits have been mediated by matrimonial sites and dating sites such as Match.com, OkCupid.com, and eHarmony.com, Participant 10 sees value in the role of the human matchmaker, especially when compared to the social recommendation algorithms that push certain profiles to users on dating and matrimonial sites. To compensate for the ways that the sites did not completely correspond with the ways he wanted to find eligibles, Participant 10 noted a number of ways that he could become attractive to other users: he would write more when responding to questions, be more active on sites that allow one to write more, fill out as much as he found relevant in profiles, and used keywords that could help users and algorithms find him amongst the other profiles. So while he was submitting to the dating and matrimonial sites, he was more excited about the possibilities of human-mediated matchmaking. To make up for this incongruence, he tried to anticipate the structures of the matching algorithms and “game” the system so that his profile would be shown to as many other eligibles as possible.

The matchmaking algorithm and the mediated nature of dating and matrimonial sites were carefully considered by our subjects. Participant 8 also spoke about her discomfort with matchmaking algorithms, though in her case, she was more resistant to the idea of recommending in general.

I didn’t find it helpful to be on [eHarmony[.com](http://eHarmony.com)] because it didn’t let you search yourself. They give you options. I guess it’s like computerized. You fill out a huge profile and depending on what score you get they will match you with guys that would be compatible with you.So you can’t necessarily go through and filter. I don’t think. I didn’t give myself too much time on there. I found it irritating because they select guys for you. I didn’t let my mom do that. A majority of the times it didn’t even make sense...like how did they come up with this? Why would they think I would be compatible with this guy? [Emphasis added.]

In her case, Participant 8 did not welcome recommendations from eHarmony, but also mentioned that she would feel uncomfortable if her mother did that for her. So Participant 8 was uncomfortable with the whole matchmaking apparatus, no matter how it was carried out. She was aware of the various actors availing themselves to her, but she resisted – or wished to resist – their offers because they did not give her the agency to do the searching herself.

Participant 6 also saw their use of matrimonial sites in relationship to the ability of their parents to match them. But she joined Shaadi.com and Bharatmatrimony.com when she decided she should “settle down.” She noted,

Since I was young, it has been instilled in me that I am to, to marry a Sindhi [a regional ethnicity] man one day. I was actively involved in the Sindhi community back in 2007, but completely lost touch after I graduated college and got a job. My parents aren’t as involved in the community, either. So I figured joining matrimonial websites which has Sindhi men would make my search easier.

Participant 6 was eager to fulfill her culturally mandated role to find a man of her regional ethnicity, but her parents were not involved enough in the cultural networks to help serve the role as a matchmaker. Recognizing this fact, she has become a part of the networks on two sites in order to fulfill the desire to find a Sindhi partner despite the fact that it would be difficult for her parents to find someone with whom to arrange her.

Though all subjects talked about the sites from the perspective of managing the sites for themselves, one subject, Participant 1, did admit that his friends set up most of his profiles for him and then relinquished control to him. The use of matrimonial sites by family members became a factor in our subjects’ use of matrimonial sites. Several subjects mentioned stories of encountering the parents and family members of other users who contacted them for the eligible. These contacts with parents were usually framed as undesirable interactions with eligibles on the subcontinent. Participant 2, in explaining her preference for a site that had more diasporic South Asians as opposed to Indian nationals, noted about one South Asian site, “I felt that Shaadi.com was not about people speaking about their personality and what makes them happy. It was more like people’s parents looking to marry off their kids.”

Several subjects who are members of Shaadi.com, which uses phone numbers to verify accounts and makes those numbers public at first by default, explained that they received calls from India. Not only were they not interested in pursuing relationships with Indian nationals, but they were extra turned off by the idea of dealing with someone other than the eligible him or herself. Take, for instance, the experience of Participant 1:

I even put my phone number on there and there was like a bad awkward experience. Some girl’s dad called me 6 times and left messages saying call back...blah blah. It was weird. Maybe I shouldn’t have put my phone number. Going from not talking to anybody to straight up giving you calls and leaving you messages. I had never spoken to her or anything. But a lot of the profiles on Shaadi.com are created by siblings, parents, friends. That’s the other part about Shaadi. There are a lot of parents that put up profiles for their kids and it clearly says, “profile created by.” So you know if it was created by the parent or the person themselves, or a sibling, or something like that.

Participant 10 expressed a discomfort with not knowing who was behind the profile. He says, “The South Asian one, Shaadi, I’ve tried off and on over the last couple years. You really don’t know who is on the other side. It could be a sibling, a parent, friends…”

While users knew that the South Asian sites were often used by family member actors and that was not particularly attractive, the use of these sites was still attractive for some reasons.

Finally, those subjects who were less serious about the pursuit of a spouse came to dating sties and, somewhat awkwardly or reluctantly, to matrimonial sites with a particular perspective on these sites as actors. Participant 5 explained her preference for dating sites by saying, “Shaadi's name says it all. It's about marriage. If you talk to someone on there, you are only talking to them because you want to get married. That feels desperate. At least on sites like OkCupid.com, it's not as serious. It's about dating..."

Participant 1 felt that there was a spectrum, and he was looking for something just right. He starts by echoing Participant 5,

Shaadi.com is very hard core serious. The name says it... you know. It's the seriousness of it about finding a life partner. Indiandating seemed less hardcore so I thought I would check that out. Indiandating was a bit too much though. I wasn’t on there for very long but from what I heard from other folks it was just a hook up site. It wasn’t serious at all. And so the quality of people on there wasn’t so great.

Our subjects, who all knew well their options and the traditions associated with arranged, assisted, and love marriages as well as dating, see their use of sites in relation to their pursuit of one of these options or a hybrid of them. No one found that any one site was the perfect structure to pursue the courtship they were seeking, but many were aware of how certain attributes of certain sites did or did not correspond to their desires.

In this section, we have noted the ways in which the remediation of certain social and non-social actors that could be seen as providing a matchmaking function played a role in our subjects’ preference for or thoughts on various sites. In the next section, we will look at the remediation of a tool – the biodata – in the pursuit of courtship.

**Remediating Biodata**

For those who are specifically designated as a matchmaker, one crucial tool to maintain a repository of eligibles is the biodata. Biodata allow matchmakers to keep track of the people who they are working with to find matches. Biodata fill the matchmakers’ database. These one-page entries, when used by professional matchmakers, are tools for mediating the process of arrangement. Whereas some arranged and assisted marriage connections are made by family or social ties that are made solely with the agency of the eligibles and/or their parents or other family members, biodata are a medium that are necessitated only by the presence of a separate matchmaker. They are a technology of the matchmaker.

Biodata vary in format, layout and style. Still, the characteristics most commonly mentioned are date of birth, caste, religion, education, occupation, income, height, weight, complexion, accomplishments, family status, personal interests, conditions of marriage, and partner expectations. Most profiles are accompanied by a photograph either in the body of the biodata or as a separate attachment.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The awareness of our subjects with these forms of courtship and this technology came up implicitly and explicitly throughout our interviews.

Because the biodata form is tied to traditional modes of courtship or arrangement, diasporic South Asians, unlike members of some other ethnicities in the American context, have long faced the model of tying the act of representing oneself in terms of numbers, categories, and words, to courtship. It was surprising to find out, then, that many of the subjects in this study expressed discomfort at filling out the forms on various dating and matrimonial sites. While subjects like Participant 10 (above) found it important to use many of the fields on dating and matrimonial sites strategically, many of the users were using other modes of matchmaking to get away from the strictures of a technology like the biodata and a process like traditional matchmaking.

Participant 7, who was not only interested in South Asian eligibles[[28]](#footnote-28) spoke about her preference for online platforms that created opportunities to pursue dates based on mutual interest expressed quickly, such as Tinder, or through a group date, facilitated by Grouper. After speaking about these models, she said,

I would feel better about meeting someone like that rather than on Shaadi.com where it feels like a business deal. I feel like other sites provide other areas you can explore rather than the traditional Indian criteria of finding someone. If I wanted that I would create a biodata and have my parents pass it around and maybe not even need to go on Shaadi. But I want more than that.

The models of matching that Participant 7 expressed interest in were not incredibly tied to presenting intense amounts of data. Both examples she presented as positive options require very little to be provided, and she specifically resisted the idea of biodata as appropriate ways of presenting oneself to potential suitors. In this case, though she is mostly interested in a South Asian-American, she is most interested in models of courtship that are not remediations of “traditional” South Asian modes.

When asked how she felt about the various sites she used, Participant 2 noted,

Well, obviously, any software package is going to try and make a digital representation of the real world. And it’s only going to do it so accurately…I feel like eHarmony was the best because it brought the personality dimension into it rather than just the biodata…I think people are busy so there may be a better match for you out there, but...people can get inundated. A part of it is a little dehumanizing. You are taking something that is inherently emotional and channeling it through a machine. These are real human beings. You may connect with somebody, and it could be a spark, but it could be a one sided spark, but to the machine it doesn’t take into an account that somebody is damaged in the process.

Here Participant 2 puts the biodata in its context, as a tool of matchmaking, and notes that the software that each site runs uses different protocols for using the biodata-like profile. Though she doesn’t mention the roles of human matchmakers, she implies that certain algorithms and software can be more humane.

Finally, Participant 1 brought up the ways that Shaadi.com’s profiles mirrored the kinds of information that went into biodata. This was seen as unattractive to him as a user. When asked why Shaadi.com’s structure was not attractive to him, “too traditional,” he said,

It was more bio-data-ish. Stuff that you would put on a biodata. Like some of the standard stuff is like you know, height, weight and skin tone…That’s all standard and not that detailed. Well I thought that the skin tone thing, in particular, was very traditional. Like they are very fair or wheatish. They are dark or whatever. They had like 7 different kinds of skin tone like that you can pick from. [Chuckle]

Here, the structure of the online sites’ structures were seen as comparable but favorable to biodata. This last comment brings up directly the idea of different uses of the site for diasporic subjects as compared to the use of sites by Indian nationals. No matter how much skin tone might become a part of mate selection in the American context, articulating this is seen to go against the social practices of a post-racial American culture. In the next section, we will discuss the remediation of diasporic identity with regards to the sites that our subjects used.

**Remediating Diasporic Subjectivity**

The concepts of ethnoscapes, technoscapes, and mediascapes remind us that in the contemporary era, the nation-state becomes a less compelling way to organize culture. By characterizing the contemporary shape of culture as -*scapes*, Appadurai brings attention to the ways that the relationships between people, nation-states, and cultures of tradition are inconsistent but shaped by a series of forces that constitute the transnational flows of people, technology, and media, for instance. [[29]](#footnote-29) The diasporic subjects in this study have all made a home for themselves in the United States, specifically in the New York City area in New York and New Jersey. Though it was not necessarily a surprise that the subjects considered sites that both do and do not market themselves specifically to the South Asian diasporic communities, we were surprised by the various ways that our subjects justified the sites that they used, especially as those justifications pertained to one’s pursuit of a suitor that fitted within a specific set of constraints.

While all respondents considered both South Asian diasporic and multiethnic sites, most of them used some of both. For the most part, the subjects expressed a desire to browse or search South Asian-American eligibles. Many of our subjects mentioned their tactics for finding appropriate eligibles on a number of sites. On multiethnic sites targeted towards Americans, they spoke specifically about tactics to find other South Asians. To do this, users often used sites where they could sort through profiles by ethnicity. Ethnicity is also often listed on profiles on dating and matrimonial sites. The category South Asian, it turns out, isn’t particularly universally legible as a standard. On some sites, “South Asian” was a category. On sites where “Asian” was a category, but not “South Asian,” those looking for Hindu eligibles were able to narrow down their search results by using both the ethnicity and religion fields. On still other sites, “East Indian” was the particular designation that users needed to use.

Another theme that arose throughout our interviews was the ways in which sites for South Asian users did not meet the needs of the diasporic subjects, and rather were too targeted towards users on the subcontinent. Without prompting, several of the subjects we interviewed specifically stated that they were not interested in the prospects of meeting someone living in India. Participant 1 noted, “They ask if you wanted to put your income or if you wanted to put HIV status, or your citizenship status. I don’t know. It felt like it was very much geared towards folks overseas.” Here, Participant 1 noted that the citizenship status felt out of place considering his own priorities, because he wanted to find eligibles who lived nearby and implied that a field for HIV status was unexpected and felt out-of-place. [[30]](#footnote-30)

Many participants who were looking for South Asian-American mates were interested specifically in people with specific regional ethnic or religious identities, like Participant 6 above. For these subjects, membership in a site designed specifically for intra-group marriage was a part of the user’s repertoire of sites used. Often this was a spin-off of BharatMatrimony.com for specific ethnic groups, but sometimes it was a specific matrimonial site for a religious group. In one case, a subject used a small, elite secret site for members with a specific regional, ethnic and caste intersection. These examples show how affiliations specific to culture on the subcontinent are still important for the diasporic subjects.

The pursuit of diasporic South Asians specifically was strategized in a number of ways. Participant 7 articulated a common desire to pursue courtship with South Asian-Americans by talking about her justifications for not using Shaadi.com seriously.

Because I’m under the impression that most of the people on Shaadi.com are from India and I’m not sure if...I guess I’m under the impression that most of the people live in India and I’m not open to doing anything long distance. I’m not really interested in...anything that complicated. And different samajes[[31]](#footnote-31) and associations have their own private sites, I think. I’m more interested in something close by… Somebody that was brought up in a similar Indian and American culture here would be a nice starting point…

Further contextualizing her earlier desire to avoid the transactional nature of Shaadi.com (above), she continued,

But I’m also not going to just limit myself to Indians and that’s what Shaadi.com does. If you’re Indian and are serious to get married...like right away, and only want another Indian, then you go to that site. I’m not into just meeting someone to talk about “shaadi” so I don’t think I’m the right person to be on Shaadi.

Here, Participant 7 noted the specific reasons for preferring the American-targeted multiethnic sites and emphasized her diasporic subjectivity as something that is best addressed by these sites.

Like Participant 7’s observation that encountering others who are Indian-American would be a “nice starting point,” others expressed a desire to pursue relationships with other Indian-Americans exclusively. Participant 8 also discussed her desire for a specific mix of Indian and Indian-American:

[I’m not so into Shaadi, because] there are a lot of men on there that are not citizens and not [my] type. I *dunno*. It’s just guys I would never be interested in. And citizenship is definitely a big thing. That’s why I rely on Match.com more. It’s more Americanized guys that do have that Indian culture, too. That’s what I’m looking for - someone like me. But with Shaadi.com it could get a little more...I don’t know how to say the right word, but...*desi* I guess.

In this regard, Participant 8 echoed a sentiment expressed or assumed by many of our subjects: for a number of reasons, another South Asian-American was what they were using matchmaking technologies to find. These desires were articulated through the various technological and human actors surrounding these subjects.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have explored the use of dating and matrimonial sites by South Asian-Americans in the New York City metro area. In so doing, we have noted the ways that the various human and non-human actors in “traditional” matchmaking processes have been remediated, as have the tools involved in mediated matchmaking, and the users’ own diasporic identities and subjectivities. Understanding South Asian marriage as all about matchmaking and courtship and American/Western marriage as solely invested in the pursuit of love, dating, and/or sex, one simplifies the ways that modernity is actually experienced, and the many possibilities that modern or contemporary subjects engage in.

While modernity affords “the pure relationship,” an equitable one that is based on the affinity for two people for each other or the loss of interest in each other, which leads Giddens to advocate for the no-fault divorce, human beings blind ourselves to other systems of relating other than “love.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Or, alternatively, we limit our definition of “love.” Instances of mediated matchmaking lay bare the technologized and mediated pursuit of courtship and its complicity in models of arrangement, assisted marriages, and, in fact, love. Diasporic subjectivity, as described in this essay, is a particularly interesting boundary object that points out the ways that various modes of relating are coeval in a contemporary globalized world. In considering the experiences of diasporic South Asians’ use of dating and matrimonial sites to pursue relationships, we are reminded of the various courses and pathways enabled by transnational ethno-, techno-, and mediascapes. As courts, legislatures, social scientists, and culture at large attempt to codify certain modes of marriage and courtship within the United States and other nations, it is helpful to be reminded of the many coexisting and varied models for these modes of relating.

**Appendix**

Participant 1: Male/34/U.S.-born/Raised Hindu

Participant 2: Male/35/Indian-born

Participant 3: Female/35/Indian-born/Raised Hindu

Participant 4: Female/29/U.S.-born/Raised Hindu

Participant 5: Female/33/U.S.-born/Raised Buddhist

Participant 6: Female/26/Indian-born

Participant 7: Female/30/U.S.-born/Raised Hindu

Participant 8: Female/32/U.S.-born/Raised Hindu

Participant 9: Female/29/U.S.-born/Raised Jain

Participant 10: Male/33/U.S.-born/Raised Hindu

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17. While both authors have studied sociality within the Indian (diasporic) context, for this study only Raja conducted interviews with the subjects. The interview protocol, designed collaboratively by both authors, has been used for other research projects with other research designs not about the South Asian diaspora. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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19. The NY Metropolitan statistical area spans across 3 states and is comprised of 10 counties in New York; 12 counties in northern New Jersey; and 1 county in Pennsylvania. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. US Census Bureau, ‘The Asian Population: 2010’, March 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-11.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Shaadi is the Urdu word for marriage. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, Remediation: Understanding New Media, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
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25. Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Manglik is an astrological designation based on the position of Mars. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
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28. Participant 7 said that she would “like someone South Asian, but [is] open-minded to anything.” [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Arjun Appudarai, Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. It, indeed, is rarely asked on American-targeted sites that facilitate heterosexual coupling. It is sometimes a field on sites for men seeking men. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Samajes are ethnic caste communities. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
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