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Deepika Kumari Meena
Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar, India

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Educational Migration and Agency among Tribal Young Women

By Deepika Kumari Meena

Abstract

In this paper, I examine the understanding of agency among the tribal young women attending college in Pratapgarh (Rajasthan), India. Particularly in light of this shift in their living and academic spaces, I look at how they interpret and perform their agency when it comes to being in a romantic relationship and getting married. It is not uncommon for tribal members to engage in romantic relationships and to seek love marriages. The number of young women migrating for education is increasing. As a result of educational migration, the practice of live-in relationships, romantic relationships, and love marriages has also increased over time among tribal youths. The data for this study were collected over nine months from interviews, group decisions, and participant observation of tribal young women in places they frequent, such as college campuses, hostels, homes, markets, and parks. In addition, the narratives of their parents and other family members are also analyzed to explore this aspect of agency, space, and marriage. In various domains encompassing academic and domestic spheres, my investigation has revealed that tribal young women exhibit agency concerning their involvement in romantic relationships and their preferences for either love or arranged marriages. Notably, a prevailing pattern emerges among most of my participants, regardless of their current romantic status or chosen marital arrangement, which centers around their post-wedding aspirations to pursue their education and attain government employment, thereby fostering financial independence. For these participants, marriage serves as a conduit through which they can sustain their educational pursuits even after entering into matrimony, facilitated by the support and assistance from their partner and in-laws. In addition to providing emotional and moral encouragement, these marital arrangements offer financial assistance, further reinforcing the participants’ willingness to embrace matrimony while pursuing their education.

Keywords: Educational migration, Gender, Agency, Marriage, Romantic relationships, India.

Introduction

Many sociologists and anthropologists have studied agency in their work as it is understood together with structuralism, practice theory, gender, and migration (Ortner, 1984; Wharton, 1991; Ahearn, 2001). However, these studies do not say much about migration into academic spaces by marginalized communities, such as tribal women. While there are studies that discuss higher education in relation to caste in elite institutions in India (Apoorvanand, 2018; Pathania, 2018; Subramanian, 2015), there are very few studies that focus on what the tribal students experience when they participate in higher education. In this paper, I focus on changing ideas of agency when tribal young women migrate for higher education from their family space to their own space, such as hostels and rented accommodations. I will examine the relationship between space, gender, and agency, mainly through their experiences of romantic relationships and attitudes toward marriage.

1 Deepika Meena is a Ph.D. student at the IIT Gandhinagar, India. Her research focuses on academic migration, everyday experiences of tribal girls, and bringing new social practices to the community of Pratapgarh (Rajasthan). Her research interests are gender studies, tribal development, education, and public policy.
This study is based on nine months of fieldwork in Pratapgarh, Rajasthan, India. 12.4% of the population of Rajasthan is tribal, according to the 2011 census. The six main tribal groups of Rajasthan include Sahariya, Mina, Bhil, Kathodi, Damor, and Garasia (Bhasin & Nag, 2007, p. 35), and all live in different districts. The tribes of Rajasthan are settled in other parts of the state, and they all have different cultural and traditional practices depending on their geographical location. The Bhil and Meena tribal groups constitute 44.5% of the total tribal population in Rajasthan. Most reside in the southwestern districts of Udaipur, Chittorgarh, and Pratapgarh. Due to their economic, sociocultural, and geographical characteristics, tribal groups have been excluded from mainstream society (Grinko, 2014, p. 15). Bhils were the most significant tribal groups in the state. Early on, their livelihood depended on collecting wood and food from the forest, but with time, they started farming (Meena, 2020, p. 5). In tribal groups, the level of education differs between men and women; women’s literacy level is abysmal in some tribal groups. Those with higher technical qualifications among the Scheduled Tribes are as small as 0.1%. Meena tribal groups constitute around 51.4% of the total tribal population of the state, and they are primarily settled in Jaipur, Dusa, Sawai Madhopur, Jhunjhun, and Sikar. The word Meena originates from the Sanskrit word Meen, meaning fish. Based on this, Meena people claim they are descended from the Matsya avatar of Vishnu. The Meena tribes do not have much written history. During British rule, Pratapgarh was known as a Kanthal Nagri. Pratapgarh's name comes from Maharawat Pratap Singh (1673-1708), who is credited to have built the city. After independence, Pratapgarh remained an independent district until 1952. Pratapgarh is RajaRajasthan’s district, created on 26 January 2008, and is one of the districts where more than 63.42% of the population are Scheduled Tribes (ST). Pratapgarh is located in the southeastern part of Rajasthan; it shares its border with Udaipur, Banswara, and Chittorgarh, other districts of Rajasthan. On the other side are Ratlam, Mandsaur, and Neemuch districts of Madhya Pradesh. The main tribes of Pratapgarh are the “Bhil and Mina and other nomadic tribes are Garasia, Ninama and Damor” (Kumar et al., 2018, p. 1). Those living in Pratapgarh and Bhils are the largest in number. Some areas of Pratapgarh also fall within the tribal sub-plan area, whose tribal population is more than 63.4%.

In January 2021, I embarked on my initial visit to the field, where I had the opportunity to visit teachers in both government and private colleges in Pratapgarh. Regrettably, the students were not in attendance, as classes had been suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this visit, I interacted with the professors of two government colleges, the Government PG College of Pratapgarh and Girls’ College, and two private colleges, LBS and APC College. In my study, I focused on the government colleges, primarily because most of the tribal young women who were residing in hostels were enrolled in these institutions and were exempted from paying fees. I also included LBS private college in my investigation because classes were being held regularly during my fieldwork, and students were present, allowing me to interact with them.

Additionally, I selected these four colleges because the majority of tribal students are enrolled in them, and they are situated close to one another, which made it convenient for me to engage with participants across all the colleges. Whether tribal youth enroll in a full-time or part-time program depends primarily on their gender identity and family’s economic status. Through programs and policies, the government has tried to ensure financial security for those tribal women who want to enroll in higher education. It is one of the main reasons for many tribal girls to seek higher education, which is believed to be a way to escape poverty and “build up their confidence.  

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1 Scheduled Tribes are recognized by the Indian government as among the most socioeconomically disadvantaged groups in India. They are officially designated in the Indian Constitution, in articles 342 and 366 (25).
to face new challenges” (Sharma & Thakur, 2010). During my fieldwork, I followed my participants at multiple locations in and around Pratapgarh, such as the college campus, hostel, their homes, the market, and in the park when they were hanging out with their friends. I gained a deeper understanding of their lives and built relationships with them on these occasions. The study was conducted through participant observation, focus group discussions, and in-person interviews. Additionally, I interviewed family members to better understand how community marriage practices have changed. Most of my participants belong to Bhil or Bhil-Meena, and many identify themselves as Meena and not Bhils, and their documents confirm this. This is because Meena is considered superior politically, economically, and socially to other tribal groups in Rajasthan. Bhils are the second largest scheduled tribe in India. Bhil tribes are an ethnic group of seven million people inhabiting the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan. Although they have lived alongside other communities throughout recorded history, scholars view their society as separate from neighboring caste-Hindus (Sillanpaa, 2016, pp. 43-47).

**Gender, Agency, and Migration**

Ethnographic work on marriage practices in South Asia shows this transformation. Fruzzetti (2013) and Suresh (2009) discuss how marriage practices among non-tribal communities in West Bengal and tribal communities in Andhra Pradesh, respectively, are changing over time due to women’s changing position within the community. Twamley (2014) conducted her ethnographic work in Baroda, Gujarat, and among Gujaratis who were brought up and live in the UK, including married, unmarried, and older Gujaratis. She shows how the cultural, socioeconomic, and political context can influence marriage, intimacy, and love. Much of the ethnographic work on tribal communities, especially in Rajasthan, focuses on the effects of migration on women once they are married. Youth migrate toward cities to get better livelihood opportunities and better education (Bowen, 2018; Moodie, 2017; Jeffery et al., 2008; Shah, 2016).

Sillanpaa’s (2016) work focuses on men’s migration within the Bhil community of Dungarpur in Rajasthan, discussing its implications for gender relations and roles, decision-making power, mobility, and social responsibilities. Traditionally, men and women have separate spaces to perform their duties. When men in their community and families migrate for work, women’s perception of space changes as women must now step outside the village and perform other tasks that men used to perform. Additionally, she discusses how gender roles are associated with space, which shapes individuals’ behavior (Sillanpaa 2016, p. 33). As Sillanpaa mentions, space cannot be regarded as independent of social relationships and social relations. In addition to practicing their agency in different ways, tribal women can also build or define their relationships with each other, family members, and community members through this experience. Bhil women have more freedom and a more flexible marriage practice than Hindu women. The freedom and status of Bhil women in their community reflect an ideal of Bhil women’s freedom; Sillanpaa describes how unmarried Bhil women can “dance, sing, laugh and joke with any male member of the community” (Sillanpaa, 2016, p. 60). As a result of the migration of men out of their region, women now handle all the household responsibilities, and here the concept of space has also changed. It is now necessary for women to step outside their homes and villages regularly, which may be uncomfortable for them. The experience has altered these women’s perception of space and allowed them to make independent decisions without men’s input.

Moodie’s (2017) research is focused on the Dhanka urban tribal group of Rajasthan, which constitutes only 1.09% of the state’s tribal population according to the 2001 census. The article addresses tribal identity, collective aspirations, and intimate gender relationships in the practice of
Samuhik Vivah. Despite having a disputed origin and unclear social status due to the absence of written history and fixed occupation, Dhanka was eventually granted tribal status in Rajasthan after being excluded from the first list of scheduled tribes in 1950. As of 2001, a significant portion (56.36%) of Dhanka, Tadvi, and Tetaria tribal groups live in urban areas (Moodie, 2017). Moodie’s study also focuses on community migration which has led to changes in marriage practices and women’s position in the family. Contrary to Sillanpaa’s study, Moodie notes that “Adivasis women lose out in this tradeoff, with their freedoms sacrificed in the name of upward mobility” (Moodie, 2017, p. 113). The Dhanka women’s understanding of gender and space has changed over time due to community migration. Dhanka women residing in urban areas are not generally considered good women if they spend excessive amounts of time outside their homes. Tribal women have started to wear veils, and their marriages are now arranged by older men in their families. Dhanka began organizing a Samuhik Vivah (collective marriage) every year after moving to the city space. When families are not able to find a suitable match for their daughter due to the high demand for a dowry or because of any physical disability, once they register in Samuhik Vivah, it becomes the community’s responsibility to find a suitable partner for the young women. In a Samuhik Vivah, every family has to give a minimum amount to the committee, which counts as their contribution. They do not have to invest separately in their daughters’ marriage. According to them, Dhaka’s girls have a greater degree of protection than those in Rajasthan in contemporary times. Samuhik Vivah symbolizes a good life and peace after marriage where girls are not subjected to violence. According to male political leaders and other members of the community, young women getting married in Samuhik Vivah are not required to give a dowry.

Most of the existing ethnographic literature discusses the migration of men, community migration, and how these migrations have affected women’s position within their family and community. In addition, they show how women’s understanding of space is changing due to men migrating. In this paper, I focus on tribal young women’s migration for higher education in their district. Because of educational migration, young tribal women’s agency is changing, which is evident when they are in a romantic relationship and seeking a love marriage.

Academic Migration and Tribal Young Women of Pratapgarh

Pothukuchi (2003), Patel (2017), Varghese (2019), and Singh (2022) researched the phenomenon of young women migrating to urban areas and residing in hostels without familial support. Their studies examined the reasons behind this migration and how it impacts the existing family structure. Moreover, the researchers explored how migration for work and education is altering the prevailing gender norms. An essential commonality among their work, as well as my study, is the exploration of how the aspirations and attitudes of young women evolve during their stay in hostels. The hostel environment provides a space for them to exercise agency in restricted areas at home, leading to the development of female friendships. The hostel emerges as a site where young women are liberated from domestic responsibilities and empowered to make decisions.

In rural areas of Pratapgarh, inadequate access to suitable schools and colleges has led many students to migrate for education. As revealed in my study, participants migrated at various stages of their education, with some moving early and others migrating after completing their schooling. Pratapgarh features two government hostels for college-going tribal women, each with specific admission criteria. The Rani Devali hostel only accommodated those who secured admission to a government girls’ college or Pratapgarh government college. Furthermore, only one young woman per family could stay at the hostel at a time for a maximum of three years,
specifically only those enrolled in B.A. programs. Adivasi Chatrawas, the other hostel, accommodated private and government college students and young women preparing for competition exams. Those preparing for competition exams were given priority, followed by college women based on their marks in their 12th and college years. Everything was free for young women in the hostels, including those attending a government college. The commonality among all hostel residents was that hostels provided a safe space for Adivasi girls, allowing them to concentrate on their studies without worrying about food or other necessities. Many of the girls in these hostels were first-generation learners in their families, making hostels a precious resource for their educational pursuits. One student in a hostel who was preparing for a government job remarked:

At home we have to think about lots of other things apart from studies like we have to think and arrange food for everyone at every time. Sometimes we don’t have cooking oil or sometimes we don’t have milk for tea etc. Here in the hostel we don’t have to at least think about all this and we can give our full attention and time to our studies. (Lalita, personal interview).

All of my participants’ families were very supportive regarding their higher education and staying away from home while earning their degrees. Due to financial constraints, most of my participants’ brothers did not pursue higher education or stopped attending college and got married instead. Young tribal women migrate for educational purposes, either daily or for an extended period. As a result of this migration, the experience of space and the agency practices of college-going women are different when it comes to being in a romantic relationship and getting married. Spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but reflect and affect how gender is constructed and understood. The limitation of women’s mobility in identity and space has been a crucial means of subordination in some cultural contexts (Datta, 2020, p. 47). In her work, Abraham (2010) describes gender roles and identities within public and private spaces in Bikaner, Rajasthan. According to Abraham (2010), women with a higher level of education and government jobs have a greater degree of freedom and personal space and are not dependent on the company of other family members when in public places. There are some communities and localities where the people are not well educated. Women are prohibited from going out alone and must adhere to all traditional practices. As with physical space, social space also plays an important role or has different rules for people based on their gender.

As my participants started to live in hostels, not only was their physical space changing, but their social spaces were also changing. Most of my participants have between three and four siblings, and families did not discriminate against them based on their gender identity. Since my participants’ families were large, their parents encouraged their children to work in agriculture and other labor because it brought more income to the family. I have noticed that several of my participants’ married brothers with children have started to live separately. As a result, they are building a separate residence near their parents’ home that allows them to commute to work. Consequently, most sons cease to attend college once they are married. In contrast, students at home with their parents continue to learn and prepare for government examinations. Their wives also receive support from their in-laws regarding higher education and preparation for government employment. Most of my participants come from similar backgrounds. Most originate from rural areas, and their family’s economic status is identical. It is significant to note that they all attended government schools and studied the same subjects. Most of my participants have not experienced
discrimination in school from their peers or teachers because they all belonged to the same community. Only after enrolling in the college did they interact with the students and faculty from non-tribal backgrounds.

Practicing Agency Differently at Home and Hostel

The young women staying at hostels are accustomed to frequent visits to their homes. At the beginning of our interaction, they often expressed the desire to return home. Moreover, they stated that living in a hostel with regular contact with their families was easier for them, in part. Aside from homesickness, they returned home whenever their family required assistance with agricultural work or when the young women needed financial aid. When the college students visited their homes during that time, they could not speak freely with their partners. I observed difficulty communicating with their partner during our visit to Kavita’s home.

Kavita often had to share a room with other members of her family. In the evening, Kavita’s family and I sat in a room and discussed women’s education, marriage, and migration issues. While Kavita was outside talking with someone on the telephone in a low voice, her mother repeatedly asked her to come inside and asked to whom she spoke. Her mother was uncomfortable with this situation and asked her to place her phone in the bag. We all went to sleep after dinner. Kavita and I slept in the kitchen while the other family members slept outside and in different rooms. A few minutes later, Kavita began talking to her partner over the phone and asked me not to tell her parents about the conversation. Her mother told me the following day that Kavita was talking to a boy over the phone, which was not good for her. She advised me to speak with her and try to convince her that it is not a good idea for her to be involved in a relationship and that she should focus on her studies and get a job instead. The following day, Kavita and I went for a walk. She told me that she used to talk to a young married man. Even though he considered her a sister, other people thought they were in a relationship. Further, she explained that a girl who lived near their house was having an affair with him and showed me her house. One night he called her, and she declined to speak to him because she was at home, and she could not talk to anyone that night. Several times he attempted to contact her, but they failed to connect, and the following day she discovered that he had committed suicide. She stated that other people, including her family, believed they had an affair, and that because of her, he had committed suicide. Now, what would happen to his wife and children? She said if she had not been at home that day, she could have been able to pick up his call and possibly save his life. The importance of space in managing and maintaining romantic relationships cannot be overstated. When my participants returned home, their parents learned about their relationship; in this case, they prevented them from returning to their hostel. It was not uncommon for them to get married and then, after their marriage, if their in-laws and husband permitted them to, they would return to the hostels and pursue further education.

Arranged Marriage among Educated Tribal Young Women

Tribal youth in Pratapgarh marry in various ways, and arranged marriages are among the oldest forms of marriage. It is not the case that all girls in the academic environment follow their desires. Several of my participants told me their parents are looking for a suitable match for them, and they intend to get married as soon as a good match is found. It is customary for families to marry their daughters within their community rather than outside it. Pratapgarh tribes perform no cross-cousin marriages and cannot marry within their clan, but they are permitted to marry outside their line. A family member or another community member proposes to both sides of the family,
and then they meet and decide whether they want to marry their kids or not. Most of my participants told me that their families arranged their marriages but would not finalize the marriage without their children’s consent. In some cases, the prospective marriage partners and their families meet well before the wedding, and only after this meeting do they make important decisions regarding their marriage. Young women do not have complete agency when arranging a marriage, and sometimes they give in because of family pressure. When it comes to arranged marriages, the age gap between the couple does not matter much; in most cases, the bride price is more important to the young women’s families. After marriage, the groom and his family support their daughter-in-law’s education. Apart from the bride price, the girl’s family prefers a family with a cemented house and some land, and the groom’s level of education is a slight concern to them.

Anita and Sunita (pseudonyms), both sisters, enrolled in a private college of Pratapgarh in a B.A. program but in different years. Anita was in her second year of college and migrated daily to college. Her parents work daily, sometimes outside the district and state. She has two brothers; both were in school, and one is older than her, but due to financial reasons, he stopped his studies and started working. He started going to school again as his family’s financial situation improved a little, and they could afford to send all their kids to school and college. The first time I met her in college was when she stood outside her class because her professor refused to let her enter. She told me that her family could not support her financially. She went to work with her relatives and village people outside the district during summer break so she could pay her college fees, and that is why she joined college a little late that year. She joined late and was late to class because she did not know the class timing, the college was far from the bus stop, and she could not afford to take a car every day. During our conversation, she asked if I would like to follow her story and spend time with her. As a result, we began meeting every day and conversing over the phone even if we could not meet. Her family could not support her financially, so she worked during summer break and sometimes during college.

She claimed that going for an arranged marriage was her choice so she could continue her education after marriage. She considered an arranged marriage one of her options in making decisions about her future. She will be responsible for handling everything if she chooses a love marriage, as she cannot ask for help or blame her family if things do not go well. Anita’s parents also intended to find her a suitable marriage partner as soon as possible. They wanted a family with a cemented house and the ability to support their daughter’s education after marriage. But before they arranged a marriage, they had to obtain the consent of their daughter; only then would they make a final decision. The second reason was that she went to college daily, and between home and college, she did not have the time to be in a relationship. She and her sister did all the household chores before going to college and then spent the entire day in class and socializing with friends. Upon returning from college, she discovered that no one was home, and she was responsible for all household chores again. Because their parents arrive home only at night and leave early in the morning, she and her siblings are responsible for all the cooking and cleaning. Often students wanted to attend college every day, but they could not because they did not have bus fares and had to work at least two or three days a week. In addition to attending college daily, they also worked on the weekends. It was also crucial for her to have time and space, so she could not enter a romantic relationship. As a result of the workload expected of them, young women at home could not obtain their own private space, and they also had a limited amount of physical space. It was difficult for them to speak to someone over the phone since they shared a room with siblings and cousins.
In contrast to Sunita and Anita, another participant named Sangeeta had been living in a hostel for over three years, had completed her B.A. and B.Ed., and was preparing for a government job. There was no doubt that she was one of the most confident and outspoken women in the hostel. In the absence of the hostel warden, Sangeeta was appointed to oversee the other young women in the hostel, as the warden had confidence in her ability to manage the students. I first noticed Sangeeta during dinner, three days after moving into the hostel. We would have dinner, followed by an evening prayer. Each day, a different group of women would be tasked with serving food to the other hostel residents, with each group assigned based on their room numbers. During this time, Sangeeta could be observed conversing with the other students and assisting those appointed to serve meals. Subsequently, after the evening prayer and dinner, I had the opportunity to speak with Sangeeta and discuss my research and objectives. Following our initial meeting, we began to meet three to four times daily and spent significant amounts of time together. Sangeeta and I became friends in the hostel; we began talking regularly and hanging out. The marriage issue came up during our conversation, and she asked me about my marriage plans. The fact that I was not yet married, as well as how I was managing all by myself, was surprising for her. Sangeeta told me on a different day that she was seeking employment in the private sector. Although she also applied for some jobs, she could not find a respectable job. She wanted to do something because asking for money from her family did not give her a good feeling. She believed it was time for her to take responsibility and stop asking for financial assistance from her family. She said she would not hesitate to accept a job in a private school or a big store. She did not inform anyone else in the hostel about her plans or share her job search with her family or in-laws. She asked me to help her find a job or tell her the right thing to do at this stage in her life where she wanted to achieve financial independence, and with that, she would not have to compromise or lose her future aspirations. I suggested she could assist me with my research, as I knew she could connect with people easily, especially in the hostel. She was very confident and knew the area and people very well. I told her I would pay her 1500 or 2000 Indian rupees per month if she assisted me. The second option was to approach the warden or another person and ask them if they could help her find a job. Later she refused the first option because she wanted to avoid going door-to-door, visiting the villages, or talking to random villagers. She told me that no one in her family or village respects women who did this work for the awareness program or another project. It had been a long time since her family members had been planning her wedding, but she always made excuses. The situation had reached a crisis point, and she had no option apart from getting married now. She once stated to me that she was not ready for marriage and did not like her current partner either. However, her family members had chosen him, and she was obliged to marry him. Since she did not wish to override her family’s decision, she agreed but did not wish to speak or meet with him over the phone. She believed that it would benefit both of them if they did not talk much before the wedding. Sangeeta noted: “There is no point in speaking to him when the last time we spoke we argued. The reason he was unable to comprehend what I said was that his educational level was lower than mine” (personal interview). Although her partner was not as educated as she was, his family’s financial situation was better than hers, and thus she had no choice but to agree to the proposal. As a result, his family was likely to assist and support her continuing her education after marriage and send her for good coaching to prepare for the government exams. That is the primary reason why she agreed to an arranged marriage.

In February 2022, Sangeeta’s marriage ceremony took place, and she cordially invited me and her friends from the hostel to attend. While waiting for a vehicle to arrive, we discussed marriage, during which I asked about their preferred type of marriage. Manjo (pseudonym) stated
that she would opt for an arranged marriage due to her status as an only child and her mother’s prior difficulties following her father’s death. Manjo stated that she would ultimately make the final decision even in an arranged marriage. She asserted that young women who choose love marriages or elope are not considerate of their families’ sentiments and thus love marriages are not ideal matches. Upon arriving at the venue, we met with everyone involved in the preparations for the wedding ceremony. The Banori function was particularly significant as the bride, adorned in traditional attire and seated on a horse, was accompanied by her relatives and friends playing musical instruments as they visited essential temples in the village and danced along the way. The partners of girls in relationships were also invited to the wedding, as it provided a convenient opportunity to meet without scrutiny. However, those whose partners were unable to attend were engaged on the phone most of the time. The following day was the primary wedding day when most attendees saw Sangeeta’s husband for the first time. Unfortunately, I could not interact with him due to his involvement in the marriage rituals. During this time, everyone discussed Sangeeta’s husband’s age, remarking that he was considerably younger than her. Despite this, they were confident that Sangeeta would not encounter any financial difficulties in the future and could join a coaching program and secure a government job.

An analysis of Anita, Sunita, Sangeeta, and Manjo’s perspectives on arranged marriage reveals a certain degree of women’s agency. All of them had opted for arranged marriages to ensure financial stability and the opportunity to become financially independent, mainly through securing a government job.

**Love and Elopement Marriages among Educated Tribal Girls of Pratapgarh**

In the previous section, I discussed arranged marriages and the reasons and conditions under which educated tribal girls are forced into marriages. This section aims to examine love and elopement weddings and how young women accept this new way of getting married. Most of my participants were in a romantic relationship with someone from the same community and did not wish to be in a relationship with someone from outside their community. Those who have never been in a relationship or been married before often prefer to be with a community member only. As non-tribal people and college teachers discussed with me during my fieldwork, more tribal women are migrating to get a higher education, and thus they are getting the chance and time to be in a romantic relationship. Ahearn (2001) describes in her work that as literacy and love-letter writing practices have grown, the meaning and purpose of marriage have changed. It is no longer simply economic, political, and social; it is primarily a matter of emotions, freedom, and love. The kinship structure has also changed. Ahearn showed that among the youth of Junigau in Nepal, feelings about marriage were changed due to migration and the practice of writing love letters which developed strong ties between the couples. However, it is significant to note that many women who have eloped with their partners in recent years still adhere to old social practices that older generations of women have abandoned (Ahearn, 2001, p. 258). Recent work describes how community and individual migration influences a community’s marriage practices (Grover, 2017; Moodie, 2015; Shah, 2010). Having access to private space allows a person to follow their wishes concerning marriage practice or romantic relationships. According to Shah (2010), youth not only migrated to find employment, but also knew they could be in a romantic relationship without any restrictions if they migrated from their village. Their parents also knew, and they tried to prevent their children from migrating, requesting that they concentrate on their studies. But in the middle of the night, young people escape from their homes. Their parents were unaware of where they had relocated, what they were doing, and with whom they were involved. With my participants,
educational migration is a method by which they can maintain their independence while their families support them. As a result of staying away from home, it has become easier for them to engage in romantic relationships. Families constantly fear their children may escape from the hostel and rented accommodations. The practices of eloping and love marriage were not unique to tribal communities. I found during the fieldwork that there has been an increase in love and elopement marriages among tribal communities due to girls’ educational migration.

Kavita’s brother and sister-in-law had a love marriage. Before getting married, they both lived together in rented accommodation, attended college, and prepared for government exams. They met during the classes, and from there, they began a relationship and started living together. While living together in Pratapgarh, no one knew about their relationship because their parents never visited them. During the first wave of COVID-19, they did not return to their village and told their families that they were preparing for exams. By the time of the second wave, they moved back to their homes. Later they moved back to Pratapgarh, and this time, their families learned about their relationship. The woman’s family stopped talking to her; she was not allowed to visit her family, and her family stopped providing financial support. The man’s family supported them and agreed to their marriage. The man’s family supported her education and talked to her parents about their wedding. But the young woman’s family was initially unprepared for their marriage and demanded a *jagda*. A *jagda* is practiced among Pratapgarh tribes when a couple is unwilling to live together, or families oppose their relationship and go to the community council. In these situations, the man’s family gives money to the woman and her family. As a result, community leaders declare a divorce, and now the couple can marry others. My participants believe the *jagda* practice is growing with tribal girls’ education. In some cases, when the families learned that their daughter was dating someone and the man refused to marry them, they demanded *jagda* from the man’s side and married their daughter to someone else. In Kavita’s brother’s case, his family paid a larger bride price to her family, and after that, her family agreed to the marriage.

Kavita’s sister-in-law tried to explain her decision to marry according to her own wish:

*Hum apna parents Kai jaise shaadi nahi kar sakta hai’. Aur agar hum sath main rehta hai shaadi sai phala toh hum nai shadi bhi bhintoh karlo. Hum dusra logo jaise nahi hai jo kissi aur Kai sath rhta hai and shaadi kissi aur sai karta hai.*

(Our generation differs from that of our parents. When we are in a romantic relationship or a live-in relationship with someone, it is certain that we will get married to that person. We are not like other people who have been in a relationship with someone and then got married to someone else.)

By making these statements, she tried to justify her decision and convey her satisfaction. In addition, Kavita’s sister-in-law stated that she was confident that her partner’s family would support her education after marriage. Because her husband is the only son in his family, she does not have to worry about the family’s financial stability. She and her husband were living in Pratapgarh in rented accommodation. While she was studying and preparing for college, her husband was also ready for the government exam. However, Kavita did not support her sister-in-law’s decision to be in a relationship, and she commented on their relationship and how their families sent them to study. She said that they should focus on their studies and look for a job and after that can find a good match for themselves. Kavita did not visit them frequently in Pratapgarh because her mother advised her not to go there and to give them some space. This tale was similar to the experience of other participants in my study. By eloping or participating in love marriages,
they maintain a distance from their siblings and relatives who migrated to Pratapgarh and can maintain agency even when married.

Conclusion

The paper analyzed how tribal young women practice individual agency when migrating to the city for higher education, specifically when it comes to being in a romantic relationship and getting married. Participants such as Anita and Sangeeta explained that they were exercising their agency differently by choosing an arranged marriage. It is important to note that some participants exercised their agency by being in a romantic relationship solely because they had immigrated. After spending nine months with my participants and following them around their college campus, hostel, park, and home, I conclude this paper with some broad observations. A tribal young woman living away from her family and pursuing an academic career can exercise individual agency in some aspects of her life. In college, the situation is different for all young women. Each tends to think differently, and some do not wish to search for a life partner independently of their families’ involvement. Many are willing to follow the traditional path of marriage because they are under family pressure and believe this will ensure their future. Some of the participants in the study had siblings who were in live-in relationships with their partners or married to their partners, but the participants did not always respond favorably to this choice. They believe their younger siblings are not mature enough for such relationships, so they think they are better off concentrating on their studies and careers rather than on relationships.

Finally, despite their differing circumstances and attitudes, one aspect they all had in common was their choice of career and aspirations for the future. In addition to continuing their education after marriage, all of them were interested in seeking employment with the government. They are not only pursuing their dreams, but their families are also providing support, and even their in-laws have contributed to the cost of their education after marriage. In talking with many participants, I discovered that marriage does not necessarily mean that education must cease and household duties must be prioritized. In the tribal communities of Pratapgarh, marriage provides new opportunities for young women regarding education and employment. Most young women are married or engaged during their college years or after graduation not only to support themselves but also to continue to pursue their education.

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