

The Changing Face of Dating in India: Why It's Worth Studying

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Abstract

This paper investigates the changing patterns of dating culture in India in relation to , and intersectionality—ethnography reveals that romance is being redefined. The literature demonstrates that while urban India increasingly normalizes dating, it is still filtered through caste and gender divides, family dynamics, and even digital interfaces. Empirical research points to the growing use of dating apps and “semi-arranged” dating practices, as well as the social-psychological consequences of digital intimacy. This paper critiques the emotional and emotional vulnerability arising from social hierarchies that underlie online dating. These findings argue that dating in India does not represent a ‘Western phenomena’ nor a disavowal of culture, but rather signifies a complex hybrid construct of romantic modernity. The scope of the study is broadened by proposing digitally inclusive frameworks, culturally relevant approaches to teaching, and more inquiry into non-urban queer narratives of dating.

Keywords: dating apps, Indian youth, intimacy, gender norms, hybrid modernity, intersectionality, online relationships

In contemporary India, the practice of dating is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by a confluence of technological advancements, globalization, and evolving socio-cultural norms. Particularly among the urban youth, dating is no longer confined to the traditional paradigms of courtship that prioritized familial involvement, religious compatibility, caste hierarchy, and the ultimate goal of marriage (Kashyap, 2020; Agrawal, 2015). The proliferation of smartphones and affordable internet access—bolstered by initiatives like Reliance Jio—has facilitated the widespread use of mobile dating applications that offer immediate, convenient, and private platforms for romantic exploration (Meeker, 2019; Lingutla & Kumar, 2022).

This transformation aligns with Giddens’ (1992) concept of the “pure relationship,” which describes a form of intimacy that is no longer bound by economic or familial pressures but is maintained for the emotional satisfaction of the partners involved. Indian youth are increasingly engaging in such relationships, guided by autonomy and emotional fulfillment rather than institutional mandates. In a similar vein, Bauman’s (2003) idea of liquid love—relationships that are flexible, fluid, and often transient—aptly describes the current online dating culture that favors experimentation over permanence.

Technological mediation, as discussed by Walther (1996) in his Social Information Processing Theory, has changed the way individuals build trust and intimacy in digital contexts. Dating apps not only shape how individuals perceive potential partners, but also how they present themselves—curating images and

personas in line with the expectations of digital desirability (Verma & Kapoor, 2020). These changes are also aligned with Foucault's (1978) theory of sexuality as a product of discourse; the rise of online dating platforms in India reflects how new media create spaces for alternative sexual narratives, thereby challenging heteronormative and patriarchal ideals.

Empirical studies reveal that the impact of dating apps in India is both widespread and multifaceted. Lykens et al. (2019) reported that 46% of dating app users found romantic partners online, with many acknowledging a heightened focus on physical appearance and instant gratification. Surra et al. (2007) and Rhoades (2010) further emphasize that new norms of intimacy—such as cohabitation and casual relationships—are increasingly normalized, even in culturally conservative societies.

Importantly, this transformation is not limited to heterosexual relationships. The decriminalization of Section 377 in 2018 marked a watershed moment in the visibility and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ communities in India. As Das (2019) and Sinha-Roy & Ball (2021) argue, digital platforms such as Grindr and AceApp are not merely tools for connection, but also for identity formation and community-building in spaces where queerness has been historically marginalized.

However, this transformation is not devoid of contradictions. As Titzmann (2013) notes, Indian youth often find themselves negotiating between collectivist family expectations and individualist romantic desires, resulting in what Dharnidharka (2014) terms “semi-arranged dating.” In this context, dating becomes both an act of personal liberation and a site of cultural tension.

Given these developments, the present study aims to explore the changing dynamics of dating in India through a multidisciplinary lens. It considers historical precedents, the influence of technology, shifting gender and sexual norms, and the psychosocial implications of contemporary dating practices.

Historical Context of Dating in India

India's romantic history is deeply embedded within the institution of marriage, traditionally seen as the cornerstone of social order. Historically, romantic relationships were not pursued for individual gratification but were embedded within community norms, particularly through arranged marriages. These unions were structured around caste, religion, family honor, and socio-economic compatibility (Pandey, 1969; Kashyap, 2020). Romantic agency, especially for women, was curtailed in favor of maintaining familial hierarchies and patriarchy.

However, this has not always been a rigid system. Ancient Indian texts reveal that alternative forms of love and union existed. The Gandharva Vivah—a form of marriage based solely on mutual consent—was recognized in the Rig Veda. Temple art from Khajuraho and Konark, and epics like the Mahabharata, depicted premarital love, sensuality, and gender fluidity, signaling a more diverse historical perspective than modern orthodoxy admits (Vanita & Kidwai, 2001). Over time, particularly under Brahmanical patriarchy, these liberal views diminished, replaced by rituals emphasizing lineage, honor, and control over women's sexuality (Chakravorty, Ganguly & Goli, 2022). The colonial era introduced new romantic ideals through English education and Victorian morality. These influences discouraged indigenous expressions of intimacy and replaced them with moral codes centered on restraint and institutional marriage. This is visible in early postcolonial literature, such as Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, which portrays the complex negotiations between caste, modernity, and romantic desire. Scholars like Chakravorty (2019) argue that this period was not just about Westernization but also about internalizing control through state, family, and media.

Dating, as a distinct practice, remained marginal until the 1990s economic liberalization. This decade witnessed a major cultural and technological shift: the middle class expanded, global media became accessible, and the internet was introduced. Matrimonial websites like Shaadi.com and Jeevansathi.com emerged, offering a fusion of tradition and technology. These platforms, while modern in interface, retained conventional filters—caste, religion, income—highlighting a continued preference for socially sanctioned unions (Agrawal, 2015).

The arrival of Reliance Jio in 2016, which made internet data widely accessible across social classes, marked a significant turning point. Mobile dating apps like Tinder and Bumble found fertile ground in cities and small towns alike. With over 7.5 million daily swipes reported in India (Jha, 2019), dating platforms began reshaping courtship from a private act to a digital one.

Nevertheless, data suggests that despite these shifts, structural boundaries endure. Desai and Vanneman (2017), using the India Human Development Survey, reported that inter-caste and interfaith marriages still comprise less than 6% of unions. This indicates that while young Indians may engage in dating, they often revert to endogamous patterns when making long-term commitments.

The 21st century also brought with it newer concepts—such as hookup culture, situationships, and live-in relationships. Paul and Hayes (2002) describe this as a global emergence of sexual exploration untethered to monogamy. In India, these practices coexist with deeply entrenched cultural conservatism, often generating moral panic and public debate (Roy & Rai, 2020; Sumter et al., 2017). Women and queer individuals face particularly intense scrutiny when asserting sexual autonomy, revealing the double standards inherent in India's romantic modernity.

Western Myths of Influence

A persistent discourse in India frames modern dating—especially casual relationships, queer intimacy, and dating app culture—as a Western import that disrupts traditional values. This perception, perpetuated in both conservative public discourse and media narratives, oversimplifies the dynamic and context-specific evolution of Indian romantic practices. Far from being a one-way cultural borrowing, modern dating in India represents a hybridization of global and local values (Appadurai, 1996; Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019).

Challenging the Myth of Imported Intimacy

The idea that non-heteronormative or premarital relationships are un-Indian is historically inaccurate. Ancient Indian traditions, as seen in temple carvings, classical texts, and poetry, depict a rich history of gender and sexual fluidity. The Kamasutra, for instance, offers detailed depictions of same-sex intimacy, and temple complexes like Khajuraho and Konark include carvings that reflect diverse expressions of desire (Vanita & Kidwai, 2001). However, colonial interventions—especially the imposition of Section 377 under British rule—criminalized these relationships and reframed them as immoral. Thus, what is often labeled as "Western" in contemporary discourse is actually a revival of India's own erased traditions (Narain, 2004).

The 2018 Supreme Court decriminalization of same-sex relations (*Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*) was a legal restoration of this erased history, not a Western imposition. Yet, societal acceptance remains slow, and dating among queer individuals is still often relegated to digital spaces, where discrimination persists (Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2021).

Western Media Influence and Local Adaptations

There's no doubt that globalization and Western media have influenced the aesthetics and discourse of romance in India. Popular Bollywood films have increasingly borrowed from Hollywood tropes—emphasizing emotional expression, dating before marriage, and live-in relationships. Movies like *Love Aaj Kal* (2009, 2020), *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020), and series like *Four More Shots Please!* and *Little Things* depict a new kind of romantic freedom, including same-sex love, premarital sex, and cohabitation.

At the same time, media like *Indian Matchmaking* (Netflix, 2020–present) reinforce the deep roots of caste, class, and community in modern relationships—even when repackaged through a cosmopolitan lens. These shows embody what Bhabha (1994) calls the third space—a hybrid realm where contradictory cultural logics coexist.

Influencer Culture and Digital Narratives

The rise of social media influencers such as Kusha Kapila, Ankush Bahuguna, and Dolly Singh has helped normalize dating in everyday conversations. Through humor and satire, they tackle themes like dating fatigue, ghosting, and app-based flirtation. These influencers not only reflect youth culture but also shape digital norms by legitimizing non-traditional dating behaviors in public discourse.

Similarly, Instagram pages like *SwipeLeft*, *Humans of Tinder India*, and *OkCupid India* feature real-life dating stories and relationship advice, creating a crowdsourced archive of contemporary Indian romance that is both global and local in flavor.

Indianizing the Dating App Experience

The dating apps themselves adapt to Indian socio-cultural norms. While Tinder's brand is rooted in spontaneity and casual connections, Indian platforms like *TrulyMadly*, *Aisle*, and *Woo* market themselves as more “serious” and culturally appropriate alternatives. *Aisle*, for example, brands itself as “Designed for Indians”—offering features like language and religion filters, family-approved options, and curated communities.

Moreover, *Shaadi.com*—India's largest matrimonial site—added a “dating” option to its interface in 2023, acknowledging that young Indians increasingly want to date before they decide.

Yet, despite these adaptations, dating apps often reproduce existing hierarchies. Filters for caste, education, income, and religion are normalized. Stoicescu (2019) and Dinh & Yasserli (2021) show how users overwhelmingly gravitate toward “homophilous” matches—those from the same socio-cultural background. Even apps like *Grindr* and *Bumble*, often heralded as progressive, have been criticized for enabling casteism, colorism, and fatphobia (Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2021).

Negotiated Modernity, Not Westernization

It is reductive to attribute India's changing dating culture solely to the West. As Lewis (2017) and Agrawal (2015) argue, Indian youth are not mimicking the West but selectively adapting global scripts to fit local realities. They navigate what Nandy (1983) called “the intimate enemy”—the tension between modern aspirations and inherited values.

Thus, dating in India is not a cultural copy-paste, but a process of hybrid identity construction, where *Tinder* profiles might include a quote from Rumi alongside “open to marriage,” and users might toggle between *Bumble* and *Shaadi.com* depending on context.

Literature Review

The changing landscape of dating in India has generated significant interest across disciplines—ranging from psychology and sociology to gender studies and media research. This section organizes the review of relevant scholarship into three key domains: (1) changing romantic attitudes, (2) the role of digital technology, and (3) the risks and complexities of online dating. Each domain is discussed through the lens of well-established social and psychological theories, supported by empirical studies.

Changing Romantic Attitudes: Between Individualism and Collectivism

Indian society is traditionally rooted in collectivism, where family, caste, and community dictate life choices—including marriage (Triandis, 1995). However, recent research suggests a shift toward more individualistic romantic preferences among Indian youth. Kashyap (2020) refers to this as negotiated modernity, where individuals attempt to balance emotional intimacy with cultural expectations. Empirical studies by Alexander et al. (2006) and Sujay (2009) found that a substantial percentage of Indian youth reported being in romantic relationships—often without parental knowledge. Sujay's college-based study found 54% of male and 32% of female students in relationships, many with premarital intimacy. These changes are further supported by Singh & Sharma (2019), who note that urban, middle-class Indians are moving toward partner choice based on emotional compatibility. Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory—specifically the intimacy vs. isolation stage—offers a developmental framework for understanding why young adults prioritize forming romantic bonds during emerging adulthood. This is echoed in Indian contexts by Dharnidharka (2014), who explains how delayed marriage due to education and employment allows for experimentation with love and partnership.

Moreover, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) helps explain differing dating behaviors. Individuals with secure attachment are more likely to form committed partnerships, while avoidant types may prefer casual relationships—aligning with emerging trends of "flings" and emotional unavailability documented by Rhoades & Stanley (2009) and Roy & Rai (2020).

Yet, change is uneven. Desai & Vanneman (2017) report that inter-caste and interfaith unions remain rare (<6%), suggesting that while young people explore romantic freedom, marriage decisions still largely conform to traditional endogamous norms.

The Role of Technology: Digitalization of Desire and Identity

Technology has fundamentally reshaped how romantic relationships are initiated and navigated. Online dating platforms provide access to broader networks, enabling people to meet outside their immediate social circles.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974) explains how individuals engage with dating apps to fulfill various needs—companionship, sexual exploration, or self-validation. Lingutla & Kumar (2022) found that Indian users often use Tinder for casual interactions, while apps like Aisle and TrulyMadly attract those seeking serious relationships.

Apps also facilitate strategic self-presentation, explained by Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory and Walther's (1996) Hyperpersonal Communication Theory. Users curate idealized profiles through photographs and bios that emphasize cosmopolitanism, fitness, or education—often creating a discrepancy between online and offline identities (Verma & Kapoor, 2020).

Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) sheds light on decision-making patterns, where users assess perceived benefits and costs. In a digital environment with abundant options, partners become comparable commodities—a phenomenon Chakraborty (2019) refers to as “gamified romance.”

Furthermore, Arnett’s (2004) theory of emerging adulthood aligns with technology use. As Indian youth increasingly delay marriage, they use dating apps to explore identity and emotional intimacy during their twenties—particularly in urban areas, as shown by Srinivasan & Jain (2018).

Risks and Complexities: Gender, Safety, and Emotional Vulnerabilities

Despite its opportunities, online dating poses emotional and psychological challenges. Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) explains how intentions and behaviors around dating—especially casual sex or meeting strangers—are shaped by social norms, perceived risks, and control. Sumter et al. (2017) found that dating app users are more likely to engage in short-term relationships, with mixed outcomes. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) posits that emotional well-being is dependent on fulfilling needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. In digital dating, many users—particularly women—report emotional burnout due to ghosting, judgment, or unreciprocated investment (Roy & Rai, 2020; Lad, 2024).

Cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) is commonly experienced among users caught between liberal behavior and internalized cultural values. For example, a woman engaging in casual dating may feel guilty or anxious when such behavior conflicts with familial expectations of chastity or monogamy (Gagandeep & Iyer, 2021).

Gendered and queer experiences deserve special attention. Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1991) helps analyze how overlapping identities—caste, gender, religion, class—shape vulnerability. Sinha-Roy & Ball (2021) highlight how queer users on Grindr report caste-based exclusion, racism, and harassment. Gagandeep & Iyer (2021) found that women faced increased digital stalking and sexual coercion during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even as dating apps promise freedom, they reproduce offline hierarchies. Filters for caste, religion, and income often reflect—and reinforce—prejudice, undermining the idea that technology is inherently progressive (Stoicescu, 2019).

Discussion and Critical Analysis

This section synthesizes the findings from previous literature and critically reflects on the evolving dating culture in India. It explores the tensions between modernity and tradition, empowerment and exclusion, and examines how dating practices reflect deeper issues of identity, gender, and cultural negotiation.

Dating in a Transitional Society: Between Autonomy and Collectivism

Dating in India is unfolding in a transitional cultural space, where traditional collectivist values coexist with growing individual autonomy. As Giddens (1992) proposes in his concept of pure relationships, intimacy today is increasingly based on emotional fulfillment rather than social obligation. However, the Indian scenario complicates this framework—while emotional autonomy is rising, decisions about marriage continue to be influenced by caste, community, and parental approval (Kashyap, 2020; Desai & Vanneman, 2017).

Many Indian youth inhabit what Dharnidharka (2014) calls a “semi-arranged” dating culture—they engage in dating but ultimately seek familial consent for marriage. This underscores that autonomy is not absolute but negotiated within a cultural system where family remains central to personal decisions. Triandis’ (1995) theory of individualism vs. collectivism aptly frames this duality. Even as dating apps allow youth to choose partners independently, the eventual decision often conforms to family-approved norms. The lived experience of Indian dating is, therefore, not a rupture with tradition but a gradual hybridization of values.

Digital Dating: Empowerment or Illusion of Choice?

Dating apps are often celebrated as empowering tools that democratize love and give users control over romantic lives. While partially true, this empowerment is tempered by digital illusion.

Apps like Tinder, Bumble, and Grindr commodify intimacy through swipe-based interaction, leading to what Bauman (2003) describes as liquid love—ephemeral, low-commitment connections. Verma & Kapoor (2020) and Sumter et al. (2017) report that users often experience dating fatigue, ghosting, and disillusionment. Hyperpersonal communication (Walther, 1996) can intensify early bonding, but it also leads to quick emotional withdrawal when expectations aren't met.

Although platforms enable visibility for queer users and autonomy for women, these gains are fragile and conditional. Gagandeep & Iyer (2021) and Sinha-Roy & Ball (2021) show that online spaces reproduce structural inequalities—misogyny, casteism, fatphobia, and racism—thus undercutting the egalitarian promise of digital dating.

Further, platform design is not culturally neutral. Western apps optimized for casual, individualistic cultures often struggle to serve collectivist, relationally driven users in India. As Reddy & Rao (2016) note, Indian users often engage with apps in family-conscious ways—some even include horoscope compatibility and caste indicators in their bios.

Gendered Double Standards and Morality Politics

The gendered asymmetry in dating is one of the most critical concerns in India. While male autonomy in romantic exploration is increasingly tolerated, women’s dating behaviors are often judged against deeply entrenched moral expectations. This results in emotional labor, shame, and risk management disproportionately falling on women (Roy & Rai, 2020; Chakravarty et al., 2021).

These gendered double standards are further exacerbated by cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957)—where individuals internalize conflicting values. A woman may value romantic freedom yet feel guilt when her behavior diverges from cultural expectations. Social media influencers like Kusha Kapila often satirize this dissonance, pointing out its absurdity and ubiquity in urban Indian life.

In the case of LGBTQIA+ users, the contradiction is more severe. Despite the legal recognition following *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018), social stigma and family rejection remain significant barriers. Queer users often rely on dating apps for anonymity, yet they are also the most vulnerable to online exploitation, discrimination, and emotional harm (Das, 2019; Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2021).

Romantic Modernity as Hybrid Negotiation

What emerges is not a binary between tradition and modernity, but a hybrid form of romantic modernity. As Bhabha (1994) explains in his third space theory, cultural change involves negotiation, not

substitution. Indian youth are not simply Westernized—they are improvising love and intimacy through selective borrowing, local adaptation, and self-reflexive choices.

This is evident in practices such as “app-dating for marriage,” where users flirt on Tinder but transition to matrimonial platforms for long-term commitment. It's seen in mixed relationships where caste or religion is momentarily suspended during dating, only to re-emerge as a decisive factor at the time of marriage.

Dating in India, then, is a performance of negotiation—between love and duty, emotion and status, freedom and family. This ongoing negotiation reveals the richness, contradictions, and creativity of modern Indian intimacy.

Conclusion

The transformation of dating culture in India represents a profound reconfiguration of how intimacy, identity, and autonomy are navigated in a society steeped in tradition. This review has demonstrated that while digital platforms and globalization have undeniably influenced the ways Indian youth engage in romantic relationships, the narrative is far more complex than a simple shift from tradition to modernity. What is emerging is a hybrid dating culture—a negotiated space where individuals incorporate both traditional expectations and modern aspirations. The prevalence of dating apps, social media influencers, and the portrayal of love in contemporary media show that Indian youth are not merely passive recipients of Western values but active participants in reshaping their romantic landscapes. This cultural shift is informed not only by technological affordances but also by developmental, psychological, and sociological pressures unique to Indian society.

The application of theories such as Giddens’ pure relationship, Erikson’s psychosocial development, attachment theory, and Bhabha’s third space has illuminated the tensions and complexities inherent in this transformation. These frameworks show that modern Indian dating is not a rejection of tradition but a reflexive adaptation, often negotiated through daily acts of resistance, conformity, and compromise.

However, significant challenges remain. Dating platforms, while democratizing access to romantic possibilities, also replicate offline social hierarchies—filtering matches through caste, class, appearance, and gender norms. Emotional risks, including ghosting, exploitation, and mental fatigue, disproportionately affect marginalized groups, especially women and LGBTQIA+ users. The digital realm, far from being a utopian escape, becomes another terrain where cultural anxieties and inequalities play out.

As dating in India continues to evolve, there is a need for comprehensive educational interventions that include digital literacy, emotional well-being, and safe intimacy practices. App developers must incorporate safety protocols, anti-discrimination policies, and inclusive design frameworks. Policymakers and educators should invest in programs that foster respectful relationships and challenge harmful stereotypes surrounding dating and sexuality.

Future research should extend beyond urban populations to explore how dating culture is evolving in rural India, among various linguistic groups, and within the diaspora. Qualitative studies focusing on lived experiences, intersectional challenges, and non-binary narratives would enrich the discourse further.

In essence, the study of dating in India is not just about how people fall in love—it is about how they negotiate power, identity, tradition, and desire in a society at the crossroads of continuity and change. Understanding these negotiations can offer profound insights into the future of intimacy, both in India

and beyond.

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