

A Search for an Ideal Matrimonial Match in Colonial Punjab: A Case Study of the Punjabi Vernacular Print Media

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Abstract: *Some families became aware of the practice of using vernacular print media, particularly newspapers, magazines, and journals, to post matrimonial ads during the colonial era to find suitable spouses for their children as a result of the increasing influence of education, modernization, economic independence, and stability. Consequently, the vernacular print media supplanted the roles of priests and barbers in certain regions. This research study will examine the columns of Punjabi vernacular print media that were published in colonial Punjab beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the early twentieth century. To objectively examine the criteria used by the Sikh community, in particular, for mate selection, the columns relating to matrimonial ads are placed in perspective. A sincere and scholarly endeavour has been made in this research article to investigate the future paths and patterns of changes in marriage choices within the time frame examined. There was a dramatic shift in the traditional emphasis from an individual's merits and accomplishments to the family's prestige, financial security, and history when choosing a life partner.*

Keywords: Punjab, Media, Marriage, Advertisement, Colonial, Society

The arrival of the Britishers in India brought varied changes in the socio-economic and political setup of the country. The colonial policies of the British government essentially focused on education and tried to remodel traditional and conservative societal norms. This created a hue and cry amongst the authorities of traditions and norms which resulted in the shifting of the mindsets of contemporary socio-religious reformers. They used women as an agency to bring change in society. These avant-gardes formed different organizations, and associations, and started schools, *ashrams* and many others to help the people of their respective communities primarily the women. There was an emergence of new literature and literary

geniuses all over India. Vernacular languages were made popular by them to produce literary writeups in the form of tracts, pamphlets, magazines and journals which carried various stories, novels, poems and others emphasizing present social, economic and political conditions of the society. Not only literature but also different newspapers and magazines were used as a medium to bring about an impactful change in society. Gradually, the vernacular print media became a potent medium for people to advertise and publicize their commodities and goods. These vernacular newspapers, magazines and journals not only became a platform for advertisements for business purposes but also became a vital method to search for an ideal matrimonial match for young boys and girls of the different communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in colonial Punjab.

The marriage institution holds a significant place in Indian society. Marriage in India not only focuses on the relationship of man and woman but also their respective families, based on specific rules set by the society. Marriage is not a single-day affair and even in early times the process of marriage comprised different stages viz. selection of a partner; *kurmai* or *mangni* (engagement ceremony); marriage and lastly *muklava* (the change of residence of the women).¹

For the selection of a partner in the marriage, three important criteria were taken into consideration namely - the field of selection, the authority of selection and the criteria of selection. "The field of selection was restricted in two ways - endogamous and exogamous."² This was a major criterion during the colonial period. A second important aspect in the process of selecting of partner was the authority of selection as in who will be making the final selection of the partner. This responsibility usually was taken up by the elders of the family, priests or barbers associated with the family. The process majorly started with alerting their relations to be on the lookout for a well-suited match.³ In the normal course, the first step in any marriage proposal was taken up by the girl's family. The elders of the bride-to-be sent their family barber or priest to search for a suitable proposal. The work of the barber or priest was not only to find a match but also to assess the suitability of the families. Later thorough discussions regarding different prospects were done in the family. Opinions of close associates of the family were sorted. The final negotiation was either made by the barber or priest on the behalf of families. The next phase was the selection of a partner which broadly depended upon three aspects - family background and status; caste and personal characteristics. The family background and status focused on the family's reputation, number of family members, educational intellect of an individual, and dowry. The personal characteristics focused on age, appearance, nature and behaviour, educational qualification, occupation, source of income and knowledge of domestic chores and responsibilities.

Traditionally marriage was not only a union between two individuals of opposite genders but was a link between two families, their relatives and

communities at large. The major role in the marriage of their children was played by their elders. It is noteworthy here that no consideration was given to the individual's choice and liking, compatibility, age, and one's earning capacity. The reason behind this was that marriage did not culminate only for one's happiness but rather to fulfil specific religious and social obligations.⁴ During the selection of the groom, the main focus of the father lay on selecting a partner for his girl child who did not suffer from any ailment or physical disability of any sort.⁵

In the colonial period the rising impact of education, modernization economic independence and stability brought awareness amongst certain families to use vernacular print media especially, newspapers, magazines and journals to give matrimonial advertisements in their search for suitable matches for their children. Thus, in some places role of barbers and priests was replaced by the vernacular print media. The current research paper will delve into the columns of Punjabi vernacular print media published in colonial Punjab from the late nineteenth century onwards. The columns about matrimonial advertisements are taken into context for critically analyzing the criteria for the selection of partners especially by the Sikh community. In the following research paper, an honest and academic effort has been made to delve into the directions and new emerging trends of changes coming up in the matrimonial selections in the period under study. A noteworthy change in the trend of selection of the partner was primarily focused on the preferences of the families – background, reputation and economic stability of the family over an individual's qualities and achievements.

A deep probe has been made into the matrimonial advertisements published in the issues and columns of five major and popular Punjabi vernacular newspapers of the colonial Punjab. Out of five, one was published from Lahore and the other four had Amritsar as their place of publication. *Akali Patrika* was published from Lahore and *The Khalsa Samachar*, *Istri Satsang*, *Bir*, and *Vishkarma* were published from Amritsar. "Bhai Vir Singh was a major force in shaping Sikh and Punjabi culture, language, and politics in the undivided Punjab, before the partition of the province in 1947."⁶ He was also a prominent name in the Singh Sabha reform movement in colonial Punjab. "The Khalsa Samachar Amritsar: the weekly paper of the Sikhs, was brought out in 1899, coinciding with the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak on 17 November"⁷ in Punjabi language. It was a popular newspaper and was widely circulated for its articles on social causes and evils, promoting female and religious education. It contained novels and stories in a serialized manner. And with the passage of time commercial and matrimonial advertisements also started getting space in the newspaper.

"*Istri Satsang* meaning 'Woman Congregation' was a fortnightly newspaper. It was published in the Punjabi language. The year of publication was most probably in the first decade of the 1900s, maybe in

1905"⁸ from Amritsar and it gained popularity amongst the masses. Usually, the editorials and writeups in this newspaper highlighted the socio-political and cultural concerns of the people of colonial Punjab. But the prominent space was given to crusade against forced widowhood and they advocated widow-remarriage. In due course, the newspaper made publication of matrimonial classifieds for widows as their major agenda. Master Sunder Singh Lyallpuri was an extremist Sikh leader during the colonial Punjab and he was in regular confrontation with the British government started the newspaper namely the *Akali* in 1920⁹ from Lahore and later from Amritsar and currently from Jalandhar under the name of *The Akali Patrika* in Punjabi. This newspaper primarily raised the causes of the Sikh community (*qaum*) and the country (*watan*). Being in confrontation with the contemporary British government, this paper suffered suppression and forfeiture many times. This newspaper always raised its voice to bring sensitization amongst people about the surrounding political happenings and agendas along with keeping a special space for women's issues and advertisements for matrimony. *Bir* and *Viskarma* were the other two newspapers published in the Punjabi language from Amritsar catering to Sikh issues in colonial Punjab. '*Bir* advocated Sikh unity and reform.'¹⁰ '*Viskarma* urged technical education among young Sikhs and further training of females. It also published religious scripture and commentary.'¹¹ Along with the news regarding the socio-economic, religious and political fabric of the colonial Punjab, both newspapers showcased a special space for women's concerns. A search for an ideal spouse was also done through the matrimonial ads published in their respective columns. Mostly the literate people from the urban areas were at the forefront of giving those classifieds for matrimony.

Furthermore, the matrimonial classifieds generally outlined the contemplations of an individual's search for an ideal and suitable spouse. It can be seen in this paper that the androcentric and gynocentric norms of the Punjabi colonial society led to an impact on matrimonial advertisements as well. The announcer ads and the seeker ads were the two types of matrimonial advertisements published in the newspapers. Basically, the former emphasized two things – firstly, the qualities and worthy characteristics of the person who was giving an advertisement and secondly, demands and expectations from the would-be partner. Seeker advertisements focus on the appealing profile of the advertiser, also mentioning his requirements and demands. It is to be noted here that both variants of the advertisements did not turn their back on factors like age, personal skills, education, job, working or salaried, social status, caste, religious background, marital status and so on. The British policies of education, efforts of socio-religious reformers, and the emergence of new intelligentsia created awareness in the different sections of society. This is also visible in the matrimonial advertisements of the late 20th century AD. The matrimony classifieds became a forum of public declarations regarding

the requirements of the families of the bride or the groom. The concept of minimum expectations by an individual in marriage came to light. No doubt, the way people of the colonial Punjab were responding to the contemporary changes in the socio-economic, political and cultural landscape of the colonial Punjab, similar trends were also visible in the matrimonial advertisements published in the vernacular print media.

A noticeable change which can be seen through these vernacular print media was that though the advertisements were usually given by the parents and guardians later even the grooms especially widowers who wanted to remarry started giving ads for the prospective brides they wanted. Not only this but sometimes even friends of these men gave ads on their behalf. It is also visible through the lens of vernacular print media due to the above-mentioned factors leading to awareness in the community, thus a visible transition in the sacred institution of marriage was noticed. Unlike the earlier times when marriage was a concern of the community in a specific region. Thus, the marriage institution was transformed into a personal affair of a family rather than involving the whole community.

The matrimonial advertisements given in the newspapers portrayed two kinds of traits for both genders - acquired and personal. Acquired traits mainly focused on acquired characteristics like education- both religious and skilled, intelligence, the art of embroidery, and household chores for girls. On the other hand, the personal attributes emphasized family reputation, caste, and social and economic conditions of the party involved. Not only this even the size of the house- single or multi-storied was taken into consideration while choosing a family. In the third decade of the twentieth century, instances of matrimonial classifieds were seen which inquired about the virginity of brides as an important pre-requisite for marriage. Expertise in art, household chores, devoutness towards husband and his family along handsome dowry were the other major requirements mentioned in the advertisements for marriage.

Some of the classifieds which were given by the groom for seeking brides can be seen in the following extracts.

*"Kanya di lor: Ramgariya ladka 25 saal, naukari shuda, Khaandani, layi 12 saal jaan uston ghat umar di ladki jaan vidhwa padi likhi ghar de kam kaaj jaandi hove di lorhai."*¹²

The above advertisement titled 'A Bride Required' mentions a Ramgarhiya caste boy aged twenty-five years in service from a well-known family, looking for a twelve-year-old or lesser child widow who should be literate and homely. Another classified mentions that

*"Kanya di Lorhai: Ik change khaandani ramgarhiya 30 saal layi ik nek, ghar de kam - kaaj ton jaanu padi likhi singhni di lorhai. Singhni di umar 20 saaltak hove. Singh Koobsurat jawan hai, makaan do manzala hai, kuwari hove taan changa hai."*¹³

The aforementioned advertisement demanded a girl for thirty years old handsome man from the Ramgarhia Singh community having a double-

storied house. He was keen to marry a Sikh educated girl up to twenty years of age, from a reputed family having sufficient knowledge of household chores and preferably unmarried. One more such ad stated that

*"Sikh war layi kanya di lor: Ik Sikh Naujawan jis di umar 23 saal pakki sarkari naukari te lagga hoyeya hai. waaste ik susheel khoobsurat padi likhi, ghar de kam – kaar ton jaanu khandani kanya di lor hai."*¹⁴

In this a permanent government-employed Sikh boy aged twenty- three years was looking for a Sikh bride who should be educated, good-looking, courteous, having knowledge of domestic duties from a well-known family.

*"Kanya di Lor: Meraik 22 sallanarora Sikh dost rahat- bahit wich pakka adhiyapak layi susheel, paddi likhi, changge gharane di kanya di lorhai jo kam-kaar ton jaanu hove. Daaj babat koi pabandi nahi."*¹⁵

This particular matrimonial was quite different from others as it was given by some friend of the groom who was a teacher by profession and belonged to the Arora Sikh family. The groom was looking for a cultured and educated girl from a respectable family. One thing different about this ad was that there was no restriction on dowry. Hence, it can be seen that dowry demands were prevalent and its acceptance in society.

*"Var layi Kanya di lor: Ikjatt Sikh, 23 saal, jis di pehali singhni hunne mari hai layi kanya di lorhai. Vidhwa nu tarjih, jaat- paat koi nahi, tankhah 80 rupaye mahina."*¹⁶

Above mentioned advertisement was given for a widower Jatt Sikh man of twenty-three age who lost his wife recently and was looking for a widow for remarriage having a handsome income of Rupees eighty monthly. These ads showcased a change in the temperament of society as widows were also preferred for marriage. Thus, it was signalling that the Punjabi society of the colonial Punjab somehow was accepting marriages for widows and widowers.

*"Vidwa vayah: Sehajdhari, Singh Naukari Pesh, aamdani mahwaar 30 rupaye, Gurmukhi, Angrezi, Urdu pardeya hoyeya layi khaandani vidwa di lor, umar 14 ton 16 takgurmatghar di pari hove."*¹⁷

This advertisement for matrimony presented an inquiry of a man to marry a widow. The boy *sehajdhari* Sikh having a salary of Rupees thirty monthly, well-versed in Gurmukhi, Urdu and English language was seeking a widow between the ages of fourteen and sixteen years having a good family background and Gurmat education for marriage.

The following ad with an eye-catching title - 'requirement of a partner' was published for an unmarried girl or a child widow, well-versed in Gurmukhi with no obligation for a particular caste.

*"Saathan di lor: mainu ik Gurhmukhi parri – likhi, kuaari jann baal vidwa di lorhai. Jaat-paat nahi."*¹⁸

Another interesting ad worth mentioning here is for a bride which was

given by a friend, mentioning a requirement for a bride for a granthi (a religious priest at Gurudwara). It is to be noted here that the groom was aged sixty years, earning sixty rupees monthly was in search of a bride preferably a child widow or an unmarried girl without any caste bar.

*"Var layikanya di lor: Sade ik mittar granthi Singh nu umar 60 saal, 60 rupaye mahina tankhah layi kuari jann child widow di lorhai. Jaati bandhan koi nahi."*¹⁹

Another advertisement says,

*"Var layi Rahityian di kanya di jaroorat: daas di umar 40 bars di hai patan wich mulazam hai, tankha kareeb 55 rupaye mahvaar milda hai, sarir karke tandrusat hai jindagi da do hazzar da bema hai. Jaat da arora singh hai. Par wartan da prandhari hai is kaaran rahityian singhan wich saak karna manga haipattar viohaar siddha daas naal karo ji. Kanya baal vidwa hove jaankwari hove. Umar bees tees de andar hove. Gurbani bi wakif hove. Khalsa dharam anusar rahit babak wich pakki hove. Daas Autaar Singh Kallar Hauldar Burma Infantry Hong Kong."*²⁰

The above-mentioned matrimonial advertisement in columns of *The Khalsa Samachar* was for an officer in the Burma Infantry, aged forty years with a monthly salary of Rupees fifty-five and also a Life Insurance policy of Rupees Two thousand. His preference was for an unmarried or child widow around the age of twenty to thirty years and should be a follower of *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (Sikh religious code of conduct) and Gurbani.

One more worth-mentioning matrimonial ad published in the same newspaper was for a Khatri Sikh boy aged twenty years who was in college doing a Bachelor in Arts. Another important thing about this man was that his father was a Deputy officer and was looking for an educated girl to marry. It was stated that further enquiries and correspondence shall be done through the manager of *The Khalsa Samachar*. This ad is the following one:-

*"Var layi Kanya di lor: ik wade (khatri) Singh gharane de naujawan di jisdi umar 20 saal di hai jo kujh mahenyan nu B.A. da imtehaan devega arr dipty da supatra hai yog kanya di lorhai. Lardki parri-likhi hove. Hor likhat padat heth likhe pate te hove. Maarfat manager Khalsa Samachar Amritsar."*²¹

It can be stated from the study of the above-mentioned advertisements that the major demand of the groom and his family for a girl was to be knowledgeable of household duties and well-versed in religious education. With the impact of socio-religious reform movements, widow re-marriage was widely accepted in colonial Punjab as there were a large number of ads for child widows. The next noteworthy thing was that many times caste was not a deciding factor in marriages. But for some families, caste was still a major concern. Few advertisements boastfully mentioned financial stability, higher paying jobs, big houses and even insurance policies as major attributed traits.

This research paper also throws light on the advertisements in search of a groom published in various Punjabi newspapers in the colonial period in Punjab.

“ Kanya layi var di lor: ladke di umar 15 ton 20 saal hove, padeya – likhiya hove. Ladki 12 saal, susheel chauthi jamaat wich pardi hai, layi Ramgariya var di lor hai.”²²

The advertisement was for a groom required by a girl whose age was twelve years. She was mentioned to be studying in the fourth standard. The groom should be aged fifteen to twenty years belong to the Ramgariya caste and have a good education as per the requirements mentioned in the advertisement.

“Var di lorhai: Ik bhujangan di umar 14 saalhai, jaat -paat de bandhan tor hai ki shadi karan wale di jalad lor hai.”²³

The aforementioned ad seeks a groom without any caste restriction for a girl of fourteen years old. Thus, it can be stated that the study of the above ads given by girls' families focused on their personal behaviour, mannerism, and education. Caste specifications remained somewhat similar likewise advertisements for seeking brides.

In respect of the study of matrimonial advertisements mentioned in the Punjabi newspapers, a list of demands in marital relationships has been made. Some of the most affluent demands listed in the classifieds on matrimony were family status and background, occupation, religion/caste, educational qualification; age, physical appearance and domestic knowledge of household activities. Primarily, religion and caste were given high weightage for seeking a groom whereas less importance was given in the case of searching for a bride. Another prominent factor remained age while selecting a partner, though there was no fixed limit for the marriage age. Generally, the brides between the age group of six to eleven were more asked for. The age gap between bride and groom was generally about eight to ten years. It is to be noted that although the Child Restraint Marriage Act came into force on 1 April 1930,²⁴ but still child marriage was still prevalent and even infants were being married in the cribs. With the impact of education and reform movements, a change in the perspective of parents towards their children was seen at large through the lens of these matrimonial advertisements. Parents looked for equally qualified and compatible partners for their children. The young educated men of middle and upper-middleclass families were looking for companionship in their partners rather than focusing only on traditional and illiterate partners. These demands were not only made by the groom's family but also by the bride's family.

The physical appearance was given due weightage during these times in the colonial Punjab. It is worth mentioning here that physical appearance was one of the major attributes while seeking a bride but was not given much importance while selecting a groom. The beauty of the bride was one of the major concerns for the groom. Next on the list came mannerisms,

personal accomplishments, educational qualifications, behaviour, and domestic knowledge while picking up a bride. Family background and status were given due diligence and held equal significance for both bride and groom. Widow remarriage was largely prevalent during that period. In widow remarriage, caste did not play a major role for the bride as well as groom. Hence, it can be mentioned that there was a noticeable change in the institution of marriage with special reference to the matrimonial advertisements published in the vernacular press in colonial Punjab. The current research paper throws ample light on the preferences of people while selecting matrimonial matches based on the economic independence of the grooms. In the selection of a bride economic status and reputation of her family were duly considered than in the selection of the groom and his family. Less importance was given to personal attributes and individual criteria. Sometimes in many cases particularly in the widow re-marriage cases, attributes like physical appearance, behaviour, education, and financial conditions were not given much importance. It is to be mentioned here that the mode of matrimonial advertisements to find a suitable match was only used by the educated people living most probably in the urban areas and they were fewer in number. That is why, majorly matrimonial classifieds were for government employees and officials, teachers in different educational institutions, traders and business classes. The major chunk of the society who were illiterate or less educated did not use the medium of classifieds of matrimony as they could not read those modes of print media and also could not get their advertisements published in newspapers as they were heavy on their pockets. Thus, this medium was only limited to upper-middle-class people to find matrimonial matches. In conclusion, it can be stated that matrimonial advertisements in vernacular print media gave a platform to families to find appropriate matches for their children regarding their specifications and desires. The control of choosing a partner fundamentally lies in the hands of the elders of the family rather than the bride or groom.

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