UNIVERSITY OF WROCŁAW
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
DOCTORAL COLLEGE OF SOCIOLOGY

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BEYOND BECOMING 'MARRIAGEABLE': EMERGING ADULTS AT THE CROSSROADS IN CROSS-REGIONAL MARRIAGE FAMILIES IN RURAL NORTH INDIA

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION WRITTEN UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF SUPERVISOR:
DR. HAB. IWONA TARANOWICZ, PROF. UWR

WROCŁAW 2025

Abstract

Cross-regional marriage families in rural North India emerge when men marry women from distant cultural and linguistic backgrounds due to the severe marriage squeeze created by son preference and female feticide. Such unions often bypass customary rituals and face barriers to acceptance, with women stigmatized and perceived as low-caste outsiders. While children in these families are now reaching emerging adulthood, their experiences remain largely unexamined. This dissertation asks three questions. First, what do the socio-economic conditions of these families reveal about their local positioning? Second, how do parents, village-elected leaders, and local government officials evaluate the marriageability of emerging adults from these families? Third, how do emerging adults describe their sense of self and marriageability, and how are their aspirations shaped by social interactions and available resources?

Using a pragmatic mixed-methods design refined through pilot fieldwork, the dissertation draws on socio-economic and demographic data from 497 families across 52 villages in the Narnaul region, together with qualitative interviews with 76 participants (emerging adults aged 18–25, parents, village-elected leaders, and local government officials). The analysis integrates descriptive statistical findings with thematic exploration of semi-structured and in-depth narratives, framed by the concepts of narrative identity, intersectionality, aspirational horizons, and social evaluation to examine how families and their children navigate vulnerabilities shaped by caste, class, gender, and region. The researcher also reflects on his position as a young male researcher with local roots, which provided access and insights but required careful reflexivity.

Quantitative findings show that spouses exhibit a seven-year average age gap with older husbands, and an eight-year average marriage duration, so most children remain young. Across 497 families (738 children), only a minority of parents have formal employment, and 96 percent of mothers, whose education typically ends at middle school, are not members of self-help groups, highlighting limited social and cultural capitals. Qualitative analysis reveals that community stakeholders engage in “sympathetic stratification,” pragmatically accommodating these marriages while continuing to uphold caste-endogamous norms. Parents practice “anticipatory social evaluation,” investing in children’s education and cultural conformity to enhance marriageability and mitigate stigma. Local government officials maintain “administrative distance,” with their responses shaped by their regional origins and local embeddedness that align them with prevailing community sentiments.

Emerging adults, finding themselves at the crossroads, demonstrate “bounded agency” as they negotiate their identities, confront exclusion, and develop capacity to aspire within structural constraints.

By criticizing the prevailing marriage-market logic that equates ideal matches with socio-economic standing, caste purity, and homogeneity, this dissertation underscores the need to reconsider narrow criteria of marriageability and recognize how individuals transform intersectional vulnerabilities through agency and aspiration. Finally, it situates this case alongside East Asian contexts where demographic shifts driven by low fertility, ageing population, and late marriages, created cross-border marriage families and second-generation challenges.

It concludes that, following East Asia’s example where initial resistance to such families gave way to recognition of their contributions, rural North India should establish multicultural family centers across villages to foster community appreciation, recognize women’s social and cultural backgrounds, and support children’s holistic development through inclusive educational, psychosocial, and vocational programs.

Keywords: emerging adulthood; marriageability; marriage migration; cross-regional marriages; cross-regional marriage family; intersectionality; rural North India; identity; caste; region; socio-economic status

Streszczenie

W wiejskich regionach północnych Indii powstają rodziny międzyregionalne, gdy mężczyźni poślubiają kobiety z odległych środowisk kulturowych i językowych z powodu poważnych ograniczeń w zawieraniu małżeństw spowodowanych preferowaniem synów i zabijaniem płodów płci żeńskiej. Takie związki często omijają zwyczajowe rytuały i napotykają bariery w akceptacji, a kobiety są piętnowane i postrzegane jako osoby z niższych kast. Chociaż dzieci w tych rodzinach osiągają obecnie wiek dorosłości, ich doświadczenia pozostają w dużej mierze niezbadane. Niniejsza rozprawa stawia trzy pytania. Po pierwsze, co warunki społeczno-ekonomiczne tych rodzin mówią o ich lokalnej pozycji? Po drugie, jak rodzice, wybrani przywódcy wsi i lokalni urzędnicy oceniają szanse na zawarcie małżeństwa przez dorosłe dzieci z tych rodzin? Po trzecie, jak dorosłe dzieci opisują swoje poczucie tożsamości i szanse na zawarcie małżeństwa oraz w jaki sposób ich aspiracje są kształtowane przez interakcje społeczne i dostępne zasoby?

Wykorzystując pragmatyczny projekt oparty na metodach mieszanych, udoskonalony w ramach pilotażowych badań terenowych, rozprawa opiera się na danych społeczno-ekonomicznych i demograficznych od 497 rodzin z 52 wsi w regionie Narnaul, a także na wywiadach jakościowych z 76 uczestnikami (młodymi dorosłymi w wieku 18–25 lat, rodzicami, wybranymi przywódcami wsi i lokalnymi urzędnikami). Analiza łączy wyniki statystyczne z tematyczną eksploracją częściowo ustrukturyzowanych i pogłębionych narracji, opartych na koncepcjach tożsamości narracyjnej, intersekcjonalności, horyzontów aspiracji i oceny społecznej, aby zbadać, w jaki sposób rodziny i ich dzieci radzą sobie z trudnościami wynikającymi z przynależności do kasty, klasy społecznej, płci i regionu.

Wyniki badań ilościowych pokazują, że różnica wieku między małżonkami wynosi średnio siedem lat na korzyść starszych mężów, a średni czas trwania małżeństwa wynosi osiem lat, więc większość dzieci pozostaje w młodym wieku. Wśród 497 rodzin (738 dzieci) tylko niewielka część rodziców ma formalne zatrudnienie, a 96 procent matek, których edukacja zazwyczaj kończy się na gimnazjum, nie należy do grup samopomocy, co podkreśla ograniczony kapitał społeczny i kulturowy. Analiza jakościowa pokazuje, że interesariusze społeczności angażują się w „sympatyczną stratyfikację", pragmatycznie dostosowując się do tych małżeństw, jednocześnie podtrzymując normy endogamii kastowej. Rodzice praktykują „antycypacyjną ocenę społeczną", inwestując w edukację dzieci i dostosowanie kulturowe, aby zwiększyć ich szanse na zawarcie małżeństwa i złagodzić piętno. Lokalni urzędnicy zachowują „dystans administracyjny", a ich reakcje są kształtowane przez pochodzenie regionalne i lokalne zakorzenienie. Młodzi dorośli wykazują „ograniczoną sprawczość",

negocjując swoją tożsamość, konfrontując się z wykluczeniem i rozwijając zdolność do aspirowania w ramach ograniczeń strukturalnych.
Krytykując dominującą logikę rynku matrymonialnego, która utożsamia idealne dopasowanie z pozycją społeczno-ekonomiczną, czystością kastową i jednorodnością, niniejsza rozprawa podkreśla potrzebę ponownego rozważenia wąskich kryteriów zdolności do zawarcia małżeństwa oraz uznania, w jaki sposób jednostki przekształcają wzajemnie powiązane słabości poprzez sprawczość i aspiracje. Umieszcza ten przypadek w kontekście Azji Wschodniej, gdzie zmiany demograficzne doprowadziły do powstania rodzin z małżeństwami transgranicznymi i wyzwań dla drugiego pokolenia.
Wnioskiem jest, że wzorem Azji Wschodniej, wiejskie obszary północnych Indii powinny utworzyć wielokulturowe centra rodzinne we wszystkich wioskach, aby wspierać uznanie społeczności, doceniać społeczne i kulturowe pochodzenie kobiet oraz wspierać holistyczny rozwój dzieci poprzez integracyjne programy edukacyjne, psychospołeczne i zawodowe.

Słowa kluczowe: wyłaniająca się dorosłość; na wydaniu; migracje małżeńskie; małżeństwa międzyregionalne; rodzina międzyregionalnego małżeństwa; intersekcjonalność; wiejskie obszary północnych Indii; tożsamość; kasta; region; status społeczno-ekonomiczny

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I am grateful to my brilliant and kind doctoral supervisor, Dr. Hab. Iwona Taranowicz, Prof. UWr, for her invaluable guidance and continuous support throughout this long journey while understanding and empathizing with my various flaws. She has been the most advantageous with her insightful feedback and a pillar of unwavering encouragement, shaping both this research and my growth as a research scholar. Thank you for accepting me as your doctoral student. It has been my honor.

I am then grateful to my exceptional university professors, particularly Mateusz Błaszczyk, Katarzyna Kajdanek, Marcelina Zuber, Elżbieta Opiłowska, and Adam Mrozowicki, for their guidance and inspiration, which have had a lasting impact on my academic journey at the Institute of Sociology. Additionally, I am appreciative of them for surpassing their official responsibilities to provide me with personal support when needed. The genuine connection we shared, as well as the kindness and conversations we engaged in, had a profound impact on me.

I am also grateful to several other instructors who taught the doctoral students during the first two years. However, this list would be incomplete without the mention of Dr. Mateusz Karolak, who recommended my supervisor for the doctoral research, and Dr. Paweł Czajkowski, who was instrumental in forming an early friendship and encouraging me to submit my first paper, which I would not have been able to publish in his absence. Many thanks.

The University of Wrocław has generously supported my academic mobility, travel, and fieldwork through various grants over the course of four years. I am highly grateful to this historic institution, particularly the International Office and Urszula Broda, and proud to call it my academic home. My time in Brno, Vilnius, and Delhi significantly enriched the first two years of my research. Each location provided distinct intellectual environments that influenced the structure of this work, enhancing the overall comprehension of the data, refining the theoretical and empirical aspects of this work, and supporting the development of certain papers that eventually got published. I am indebted to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kristina Garalytė at the Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies, Vilnius University, Lithuania, and Prof. Dr. Pamela Singla at the Delhi School of Social Work, University of Delhi, India, as well as doc. Mgr. et Mgr. Adéla Souralová, Ph.D., at the Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University in Brno, Czechia.

I am also grateful to Professors Mariola Bieńko and Anna Horolets of the University of Warsaw for serving as my external midterm evaluators. Their careful review of this project,

with constructive feedback and further recommendations, greatly enriched and refined this work.

During a period in which I was experiencing difficulty with available resources, the Indian School of Development Management (ISDM) awarded me with their "CPID Research Fellowship." My fellowship mentor and the founder director of the Ramon Magsaysay-awarded organization, Educate Girls, Dr. Safeena Husain, Hon. D., provided timely guidance and support that proved invaluable to me. I am profoundly grateful to her for her time. I also greatly appreciate Komal, Mallika, and Pratyush from ISDM and Mrs. Dayawati's assistance in gathering the survey data during this time.

I am further indebted to the Austrian Academy for Education and Internationalization (OeAD) for generously awarding me with the "Ernst Mach grant" through the University of Vienna. This grant was instrumental in providing me with the necessary assistance during the writing process, allowing me to hone and refine the data analysis with the help of focused time and available resources. I cannot adequately express my profound gratitude to the institute. However, I would not have been able to achieve the desired results with the grant without the generous guidance and support I received from Prof. Manuela Ciotti at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna. She welcomed me as her research fellow and provided me with her critical feedback on the submitted writing material. I am highly thankful to her.

The seed of this doctoral research was planted in me during my time with the Kudumbashree NRO in the remote region of South Tripura, where, in the midst of data collection and field-based conversations, I began to deeply contemplate the phenomenon of cross-regional marriage for the first time. Manu Sankar, the program manager at the time, is particularly worthy of my gratitude for his encouragement and the opportunity to engage in the exploration of the subject. The period in question was not only professionally defining but also personally transformative. Thank you, sir.

In the same vein, I am sincerely appreciative of the researchers whose work has been instrumental in forming my sociological comprehension of this phenomenon. They consist of retired Prof. Ravinder Kaur, Prof. Reena Kukreja, Dr. Shruti Chaudhry, and Dr. Paro Mishra. When I first began to do this research, their writing provided me with essential entry points for this intricate phenomenon. I contacted them via email, and they were incredibly generous with their time and responses with thoughtful suggestions and encouragement. I would not have pursued this subject further if not for their responses. I thank and regard them highly.

The support of friends is essential for the success of any research journey, and mine has been no exception. In Wrocław, I am deeply grateful for the love and care that Azad, Emre, Vusal, Dr. Cornelia, Dr. Könül, and Dr. Yushawu have shown me. Olga and Małgorzata initially fostered a sense of belonging in me. I sincerely thank them for their company. I also express my deepest gratitude to Suliddin for his indispensable companionship and to Anna Shostak, Akash, and Ayesha Mahmud for their unwavering support. I further thank Biplab, Eirini, Rwik, Samuel, Orkhan, Yaman, Tadahiro Yamada, and Thananan (Film Photo) for their friendship, kindness, and guidance.

In Vienna, my appreciation goes to Bernard, Katarina, Adnan, Furqan, Rugun, and Chloe for their warm welcome and shared laughter, and to Alexandra for her invaluable administrative assistance. I also extend my heartfelt thanks to Eva for her compassionate mentorship and support for my well-being, which has meant more than words can convey.

Back in India, I owe my deepest gratitude to Dr. Manisha for collaborating on our first paper and for her steadfast friendship. I am indebted to Himanshu Bhai for his mentorship and fraternal guidance and to Abhishek Punetha for initiating discussions on my doctoral research and believing in my potential. I thank Arpan, Ajay, Netra, and Bhakti for being the best of the few friends I have. I sincerely appreciate Tanvi Bhati of the Central University of Haryana for contributing to my research documentary and showing keen interest in my work. I am grateful to Dr. Romil for his thoughtful guidance with effective treatment of my anxiety. Without his care, I could not have survived these four years.

Last but not least, I am grateful to my parents, parents-in-law, maternal grandmother, sisters, brothers-in-law, uncle, and aunt for their enduring support and love. I could not have asked for a better loving family.

I am especially indebted to my wife, Sarita, for graciously consenting to my relocation abroad, fully aware of the solitude and additional responsibilities she would shoulder in my absence. Her patience in managing our home and family life during this period allowed me to focus on my doctoral research with peace of mind. Without her generous support and self-sacrifice, this endeavor would never have been possible.

I thank her, also, for giving me the best gift of my life, our newly born twins, Vaari and Vaayu, whose arrival has inspired this work. Thank you, love.

Dedication

By the Grace of Shri Neeb Karori Maharaj ji

This doctoral dissertation is dedicated to my late Baba (paternal grandfather), late Nana ji (maternal grandfather), and late Ma ji (grandmother-in-law), each of whom passed away during these four years. Their blessings, love, and memories have been a constant source of strength and inspiration.

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List of Abbreviations

BDPO: Block Development and Panchayat Officer

BEO: Block Education Officer

BPM: Block Program Manager

CBM: Cross-Border Marriage

CBMF: Cross-Border Marriage Family

CEHAT: Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes

CMGGA: Chief Minister's Good Governance Associate

CRM: Cross-Regional Marriage

CRMF Children: Children in Cross-Regional Marriage Family

CRMF Parents: Parents in Cross-Regional Marriage Family

CRMF: Cross-Regional Marriage Family

DC: Deputy Commissioner

DCPO: District Child Protection Officer

DDPO: District Development and Panchayat Officer

DPO: District Program Officer

HKCSD: Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department

IHDS: India Human Development Survey

JASP: Jeffery's Amazing Statistics Program

MASUM: Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal

NFHS: National Family Health Survey

NRLM: National Rural Livelihoods Mission

NSSO: National Sample Survey Office

OBC: Other Backward Classes

OWP: One Way Permit

SC: Scheduled Caste

SCWC: Special Cells for Women and Children

SEPO: Social Education and Panchayat Officer

SES: Socio-Economic Status

UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund

UNFPA: United Nations Population Fund

YP: Young Professional

Glossary

Anganwadi: Rural childcare centers where women often work and access services.

Arranged marriage: Marriage where families select spouses for their children, often with varying degrees of consent from the couple.

Beti Bachao Beti Padhao: Government scheme launched in 2015 meaning “Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child,” aimed at addressing declining child sex ratios and promoting girls’ education and empowerment.

Caste endogamy: Specific practice of marrying within one's caste group to maintain ritual purity and social status.

Caste: Hereditary social hierarchy in Hindu society based on concepts of ritual purity, traditionally determining occupation and social status.

Confucian Values**:** A philosophical system emphasizing hierarchical relationships, filial piety, and traditional gender roles where women are expected to prioritize family duties and be obedient to male family members.

Cross-border marriage (CBM): Marriage between individuals from different countries, often driven by demographic imbalances, economic factors, or migration patterns rather than personal choice.

Cross-border marriage family (CBMF): Family unit formed through marriage between spouses from different countries, typically involving cross-border migration and complex legal/cultural negotiations.

Cross-regional marriage (CRM): Marriage between individuals from different states with distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds, primarily occurring due to demographic imbalances and socioeconomic factors rather than personal choice.

Cross-regional marriage family (CRMF): Family unit formed through marriage between spouses from different Indian states with distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Dalit: Communities formerly considered “untouchable” in the caste hierarchy, now constitutionally recognized as Scheduled Castes.

Dowry: Money or goods given by bride’s family to groom’s family at marriage; illegal but still widely practiced.

Female feticide: Widespread practice leading to adverse sex ratios, driving bride shortage.

Ghunghat: Practice of secluding women from public view through physical barriers or veiling.

Gotra: Patrilineal clan system tracing descent from common ancestors; marriage within the same gotra is prohibited.

Gram Panchayat: The basic unit of local self-governance, typically comprising one village or a cluster of smaller villages, responsible for local development and administration.
Inter-caste marriage: Marriage between individuals from different castes, challenging traditional social boundaries and often facing family and community opposition.
Izzat: Family honor, often centered on women's behavior and sexual purity.
Joint family: Extended family system where multiple generations live together and share resources.
Khap Panchayat: Traditional caste based patriarchal councils in northern India that issue decrees on marriage and social customs.
Love marriage: Marriage based on individual choice rather than family arrangement
Marriage market: Social and economic system where potential spouses are evaluated and matched based on desirable characteristics like age, education, caste, and family background.
Marriage squeeze: Demographic situation where there are unequal numbers of marriageable men and women in a particular age group or region
Marriageable: Of appropriate age, social status, and circumstances to be considered suitable for marriage according to cultural and familial expectations.
OBC: Other Backward Classes; socially and economically disadvantaged castes eligible for government reservations.
PCPNDT Act: Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act; law prohibiting sex determination and sex-selective abortion.
Sarpanch: Elected leader of a village responsible for local governance.
Self Help Groups (SHGs): Small voluntary associations of women who pool savings and provide micro-credit to members.
Skewed sex ratio: Imbalanced proportion of males to females in a population, often driving demand for brides from other regions.
Sub-caste (Jati): Smaller divisions within broader castes, forming primary units for marriage and community identity.
Tehsil: Administrative subdivision of a district, serving as the basic revenue collection unit.
Varna: Four-fold classification system in Hinduism dividing society into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras.

Introduction

Background

In rural India, marriages are customarily arranged by the parents of the couple and are contracted within relatively localized areas, rarely exceeding a radius of fifty kilometers. This ensures that alliances remain within communities that are culturally and socially familiar to both parties (Chiplunkar & Weaver, 2023; MacDorman, 1987). However, demographic imbalances resulting from decades of son preference and female feticide have fundamentally disrupted these traditional patterns in northern India, particularly in states like Haryana where skewed sex ratios have created a "male marriage squeeze" (Kaur, 2004; Chowdhry, 2004).

In 2019, while working with a rural development agency in remote South Tripura near the Bangladesh border, I encountered a distinctive pattern of marriages that diverged markedly from these traditional regional norms. Many young women in this region married significantly older men from the rural parts of the northern Indian state of Haryana, more than 2,000 kilometers distant. This phenomenon stood out, given the significant linguistic, cultural, and geographical distances involved. Not only were they primarily arranged by the parents for girls, rather than resulting from individual romantic choice, but the prospective grooms were frequently strangers to their families and village communities, traveling great distances to seek spouses.

With the support of several local women involved in my project, I collected more detailed information from about one hundred families in the region whose daughters had entered such marriages. Further examination revealed a characteristic mode of arranging these marriages: men from Haryana would travel to villages in South Tripura and stay temporarily with local families. During their visits, they identified marriageable young women and formally requested permission from the families for marriage. Upon gaining consent, though not in all cases, customary marriage rituals were performed to formalize the marriage. In some instances, marriage brokers facilitated these introductions; in others, women previously married into Haryana returned to their native villages and accompanied the men, serving as intermediaries between the two regions. This practice raised several fundamental questions for me: Why did these men undertake such long journeys, seeking marriage far from their immediate cultural and linguistic surroundings? What motivated families in South Tripura to marry their daughters into regions so vastly different in language,

culture, and social norms? Critically, to what extent did the women involved exercise agency? Were they consenting participants, or were they compelled by parental or societal pressures? These observations formed the backdrop to my curiosity about these marriages and the families involved. My personal background also significantly shaped this interest; as an individual from Haryana, I was largely an outsider in South Tripura, unable to converse in the local Bengali language and consistently dependent on assistance for effective communication in the villages. This personal outsider status prompted me to reflect on what might motivate Haryana men to journey to such unfamiliar, distant, and culturally distinct places in pursuit of marriage.

After encountering these practices firsthand, I began to research on these marriages in greater depth and discovered a body of sociological literature that specifically referred to them as cross-regional marriages (CRMs). The initial documentation primarily linked them to demographic shifts, distinguishing from trafficking. In their influential report from the non-governmental organization (NGO) Shakti Vahini, Pandey and Kant (2003) framed this phenomenon as "coerced marriage" linked to the prevalent female feticide and bonded labor, describing some cases as akin to even "medieval sex slavery." Blanchet (2005) submitted a research report to the Academy for Educational Development (AED) in Dhaka, Bangladesh, documenting the movement of Bangladeshi girls into North India for marriage, with a focus on women being sold. However, she suggested that some women may have planned these moves to escape poverty. Kaur (2004), in her seminal work, defined the phenomenon of "across-region marriage" as a response to the bride shortage in the North, identifying declining sex ratios (number of females per 1000 males in a given population) and poverty as primary drivers, and challenging the simplistic classification of these unions as trafficking, a narrative heavily promoted by early NGO and media reports that used terms like "bride buying." She explained that while certain material transactions, such as covering travel or ceremonial expenses, may take place, they were not equivalent to bride prices or the commodification of women's bodies in a market sense. She established that the phenomenon's primary driver is the "male marriage squeeze" in states like Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh caused by skewed sex ratios from decades of son preference (Kaur, 2004). She further established that poverty and high *dowry* (see Glossary) demand, when daughters are understood to be no more than a liability, are the major "push" factors in regions sending brides, such as West Bengal and Bihar (Kaur, 2008, 2010). They often emerged through kinship or community networks and for many women, from economically

marginalized backgrounds, they represented a calculated choice to seek social security, upward mobility, or an escape from poverty as only grooms paid fee to a broker, a key incentive for impoverished sending families. However, this transactional nature leads to the perception that the bride was "bought" or "purchased" (leading to derogatory terms like *molki*), which severely diminishes her status. By framing these unions as adaptive responses to demographic imbalance and regional economic disparities, Kaur (2004) emphasized the need to move beyond these simplistic narratives toward a structural and gender-sensitive understanding that recognizes both the constraints and the decision-making power embedded in women's migration for marriage. Chowdhry (2004a, 2004b) too highlighted Haryana's extremely low sex ratio as the key driver for men seeking brides from outside traditional marriage circles. Chowdhry (2005) further framed the phenomenon through the lens of a "crisis of masculinity," labeling the practice as driven by a surplus of unmarried, rural, illiterate, disabled, unemployed, and aged men from the dominant land-owning peasant *castes* (see Glossary) like the *Jats* and the *Ahirs* facing most acute marriage squeeze. Similarly, Ahlawat's (2009, 2013, 2015) studies in Haryana directly linked "missing brides" to the adverse sex ratio, poverty, and addiction, which rendered local men "unfit" as marriage prospects and fueled demand for brides from other regions.

Chaudhry and Mohan (2011) characterized the arrangements as "commercially mediated," distinct from trafficking but involving exploitative middlemen and informal "chain matrimonies" arranged by previously migrated brides and detailed the drivers for both men and women in their study on Bengali and Bihari brides in a Uttar Pradesh (U.P) village. For Mishra (2013), the severe male marriage squeeze leading to CRMs posed a threat to the caste endogamy yet meant a pragmatic breach out of the 'necessity' and tolerated as they involved an 'outsider' not challenging the local hierarchy directly. In their landmark mixed methods study, "Tied in a Knot," based on a survey of 226 villages in Haryana and Rajasthan including 1,247 cross-regional brides (CRBs), Kukreja and Kumar (2013) documented their "othering," stigmatization of being bought, gender subordination, abuse, and lack of legal validity of their marriages with absence of marriage certificates. Their lived experiences were found to be marked by hardships and physical harm with psychological abuse being pervasive, as they were subjected to many caste-based slurs such as the "paro," "Churhan," or "Chamaran" and derogatory regional label of being a "Biharan" leading to social ostracism and being treated a "internal outsiders." Drawing on fieldwork in both sending and receiving regions of these migrant brides, Mukherjee (2013, 2015) analyzed how caste, class, and

patriarchal kinship systems shaped these women's everyday negotiations, often producing forms of violence that may be subtle yet deeply embedded in household and community life. She revealed considerable heterogeneity in their experiences, with many brides reporting agency within constrained circumstances rather than passive victimhood, though acknowledging the structural vulnerabilities they face due to poverty, social isolation, and complete dependence on their husbands' families after marriage.

Chaudhry's (2016) in-depth ethnographic doctoral research in western U.P explored themes of inequality, intimacy, caste boundary 'flexibility,' and the critical role of natal kin support with the geographical distance from their natal homes severing social support networks and leaving them isolated and vulnerable, often challenging the 'moral panic' surrounding these unions by comparing them with local marriages. She explained CRBs' systematic cultural adaptation challenges in detail including language barriers, dietary restrictions (such as giving up non-vegetarian food and rice-based meals for wheat-based diets), adopting different clothing styles (switching from saris to salwar kameez), learning new domestic skills like making chapatis, and practicing unfamiliar cultural norms such as *ghunghat* (face veiling) (Chaudhry, 2016). Her later work (Chaudhry, 2019a, 2019b) provided longitudinal insights into how women navigate settlement over time and how community attitudes evolve. The central debate surrounded around whether these marriages lead to 'caste flexibility' or reinforce existing hierarchies. Chaudhry proposed "flexible caste boundaries," arguing that the bride's distant origin created an ambiguity about her actual caste background overlooked out of compulsion. However, this flexibility seemed superficial, as hierarchies were reasserted in different ways within the marital village. Kukreja (2017, 2018a, 2018b) argued that these marriages are a 'shrewd tactic' to reinforce caste power. A large proportion of brides come from the *Dalit* communities (see Glossary) in states like West Bengal and Odisha facing 'intersecting oppressions' of caste, gender, and an outsider status, and are often forced to hide their actual caste identities. By importing 'lower-caste' brides, dominant-caste men circumvent local taboos against an 'inter-caste marriage,' securing them for labor and reproduction without challenging the local power structure (Kukreja, 2018b). Local sayings, such as 'a woman has no caste of her own' or that 'the dominant Jat community is like the river Ganges, purifying all who enter,' rationalize this breach of endogamy. Furthering her research findings, Kukreja (2021) introduced "colorism" as a key analytical frame for understanding marriage-based capital with darker-skinned brides facing 'shaming' with insults like *kali kalutan* (of a dark skin) justify abuse and extract more labor.

She further revealed diverse pathways and actors involved in CRMs including both commission-based brokers and altruistic mediators, with desperate bachelors and poverty-stricken families both seeking these arrangements, yet the anti-trafficking discourse created a harmful narrative framework erasing their agency and pragmatic choices (Kukreja, 2024). She argued that these marriages should be viewed as exercises of women's "neoliberally compromised agency" rather than simple trafficking, calling for focus on systemic discrimination rather than blaming vulnerable families (Kukreja, 2024)

In a pioneering intervention study aimed at easing the adaptation of CRBs in rural Haryana, Singh, Dangi, and Bandyopadhyay (2019) evaluated a structured psycho-social and cultural intervention. A seven-day program integrated their cultural orientation (including Haryanvi language basics, local cuisine, dress codes, and social etiquette), self-confidence building, and peer-support activities. Implemented first as a pilot (n = 20) and later with a larger cohort (n = 47), their study found statistically significant gains in participants' reported life satisfaction and quality of life, underscoring that adaptation challenges are multidimensional, affecting identity, belonging, and agency (Singh et al., 2019). By evidencing measurable positive changes, their research advanced the argument that targeted, culturally sensitive interventions could materially improve the well-being and integration of CRBs.

Around the same time, for a first, Kukreja (2018a) examined how children born in these cross-regional marriage families (CRMFs) faced intergenerational stigma through name-calling like "*paro ke*" (children of outsider) or "Bihari," witnessing discrimination against their mothers, and being labeled as racially "inferior" or "impure" by local communities. She further revealed that they encountered systematic exclusion from their peers, and psychological distress from constant 'othering,' and how eugenic discourses compared them to "unwanted weeds" in pure fields, suggesting they diluted local bloodlines and should only marry among themselves (Kureja, 2018a). However, her analysis was based on a limited cohort, with interviews conducted primarily with their mother (n=113) rather than extensive direct interviews with the children themselves. The recent phase of research on these CRMFs is now characterized by critical engagement with dominant narratives and the exploration of new research frontiers, examining their children's social status, identity formation, and future prospects. Mishra and Kaur (2023) in their collaborative research examined how gender imbalance and marriage squeeze in north India disrupted

intergenerational contracts between aging parents and unmarried adult sons, creating multiple "biological clocks" where both groups faced time pressures with sons to marry before becoming socially "unmarriageable" and parents needing care as they aged. They revealed how families coped through renegotiated gender roles, with unmarried sons taking on domestic duties and elderly women continuing heavy workloads, while CRMs emerged as a strategic solution to restore care provision and fulfill intergenerational obligations (Mishra & Kaur, 2023). They argued that demographic imbalances forced families to adapt traditional structures rather than simply causing instability, with the burden of adjustment falling disproportionately on women across generations (Mishra & Kaur, 2023)

Manisha and Ankit (2024) specifically documented the anxieties these migrant mothers (CRMF mothers) had for their children's futures regarding social acceptance, educational attainment, and marriage prospects. They also documented pervasive 'othering' and social exclusion of children in two different districts of rural Haryana based on their research. Reshma (2020) and Manisha (2024) furthered research on lived experiences of mothers in CRMFs in parts of rural Haryana with their doctoral dissertations. Ankit (2022), however, summarized key research gaps identified by multiple scholars regarding children of CRMFs in rural Haryana. **Kaur (2004, 2012, 2013)** raised fundamental questions about whether marriage patterns would differ for sons versus daughters CRMFs and concerns about their social acceptance and marriage prospects. **Mishra (2013, 2016)** questioned whether these children might form distinct *sub-castes* (see Glossary) and face gender-based variations in their marriage prospects as the phenomenon continues. **Chaudhry (2016, 2019b), Chowdhry (2005),** and **Kukreja (2018a, 2018b)** extensively explored issues of social recognition, inheritance rights, discrimination patterns, and psychological well-being, highlighting how children face multilevel stigmatization and othering behaviors from early childhood through adulthood.

It is clear that the existing research on these CRMFs in rural North India has predominantly centered on women's experiences of migration and adjustment, caste dynamics and kinship negotiations, or the structural factors driving these marriages in response to demographic imbalances. While these studies have provided rich ethnographic accounts of how CRBs navigate cultural differences and community resistance, they have largely overlooked the systematic analysis of how entire families are positioned within local socio-economic hierarchies and, crucially, how the children of these unions experience their

social positioning as they transition to adulthood. This literature gap becomes particularly significant as the first generation of children reaches emerging adulthood, necessitating a shift in analytical focus toward understanding their lived experiences and future prospects, particularly marriage prospects as evoked by several scholars. **First,** understanding how CRMFs themselves are positioned within local socio-economic hierarchies becomes essential when recognizing that structural conditions fundamentally shape children's life chances and identity formation processes. This question emerges from existing literature's focus on women's individual experiences while neglecting systematic analysis of how entire families navigate social stratification systems over time. Research by Kaur (2004, 2008, 2010) has documented economic motivations driving these marriages, while studies by Kukreja and Kumar (2013) and Chaudhry (2016) have revealed patterns of household vulnerability, but systematic quantitative analysis of socio-economic positioning within local hierarchies remains absent.

Second, in the rural Indian context, "marriageability**"** or an individual's suitability for marriage functions not as an individual attribute but as a collectively negotiated social status shaped by community norms and institutional gatekeepers (South, 1991; Bridges & Boyd, 2016). Although extensive research documents resistance and stigmatization toward CRBs (Mishra, 2013; Mukherjee, 2015; Kukreja, 2018a), there is a lack of a systematic understanding of how these community evaluations extend to the next generation and vary across parents, village-elected leaders, and local government officials who are important stakeholders. This question is crucial because marriageability serves as a proxy for broader social acceptance and belonging, indicating whether demographic shifts are transforming social boundaries or merely creating temporary accommodations that preserve existing hierarchies (Srinivas, 1984). In rural India, communities assess potential spouses through intersecting criteria of caste positioning, educational attainment, family reputation, economic prospects, and cultural competency applying multilayered standards and weightings across parents, extended kin, Sarpanches, and marriage intermediaries (Kapadia, 1966; Anderson, 2007). These institutional gatekeeping processes produce hierarchies of desirability that both reflect and reproduce social stratification while accommodating gradual change (Bourdieu, 1977). For children of CRMFs, marriageability becomes particularly complex, as community actors must navigate competing criteria as educational achievements versus caste authenticity or economic prospects versus cultural belonging creating contested terrain where different actors may reach divergent conclusions about their suitability for marriage.

Third, foregrounding the perspectives and experiences of emerging adults themselves addresses the notable absence of youth voices in existing research while recognizing emerging adulthood as a critical life stage for identity consolidation and future planning. The literature documents various forms of discrimination and exclusion these children face (Kukreja, 2018a; Manisha & Ankit, 2024), but systematic understanding of how they subjectively experience these challenges, develop coping strategies, and construct coherent narratives about their identities and futures remains lacking. This question is essential because young people's own sense-making processes and aspirational development occur through complex negotiations between structural constraints and individual agency that cannot be understood through external observation alone. Research by Ankit (2022) called for biographical approaches to understanding these experiences, while work by Manisha (2024) and Reshma (2020) examined various parameters affecting family functioning, but comprehensive first-person accounts of identity formation and aspirational development remain absent from the literature. Emerging adults' sense of self directly informs how they perceive their own marriageability, transforming it from an externally imposed judgment into an internally negotiated identity. Through every day social interactions with family members, peers, and community gatekeepers, these young people receive affirmation, resistance, or reinterpretation of the qualities deemed essential for marriage within CRMFs (Bridges & Boyd, 2016; Lamont, 2012). Their aspirations for marriage reflect a synthesis of personal dreams and the structural realities of available social, cultural, and economic resources, highlighting how individual agency and collective norms coalesce to shape future trajectories.

These three research question backgrounds form the core of this doctoral dissertation, which addresses broader transformations occurring across rural India while taking the theoretical liberty to critically examine and challenge the marriage market logic that typically frames discussions of marriageability. Rather than accepting marriageability as a neutral or inevitable social sorting mechanism, this dissertation interrogates how such logic perpetuates social hierarchies and exclusions, particularly for young people from CRMFs who must navigate inherited social disadvantages while developing strategies for advancement. By examining how social inequality is either reproduced or challenged across generations, this research reveals the inadequacy of market-based frameworks for understanding the complex negotiations of identity, belonging, and social mobility that characterize emerging adulthood in rural contexts.

Why Emerging Adults?

The first generation of children born to CRMFs, or CRMF children, in the late 1990s and early 2000s are now transitioning to adulthood, representing a unique demographic whose experiences could offer critical insights into the long-term implications of these marriages for rural social organization. The developmental stage of emerging adulthood, typically spanning ages 18 to 25, becomes particularly significant for understanding these young people's experiences because it coincides with intensified marriage negotiations and heightened awareness of social positioning within community hierarchies. Arnett's (2000, 2007) conceptualization of this period, characterized by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities, offers a crucial lens for examining how CRMF children navigate their transition to adulthood. The application of emerging adulthood theory to the Indian context has been further developed through Seiter (2009, Seiter and Nelson (2010), and Mitra and Arnett (2025) demonstrating that while core features of emerging adulthood are evident among Indian youth, they manifest differently due to cultural values emphasizing interdependence, family obligations, and collective decision-making processes. Their work reveals that emerging adults in India experience identity exploration within more constrained parameters than their Western counterparts, particularly regarding career choices and marriage decisions, where family input remains significant (Mitra & Arnett, 2025). Seiter (2009) and Seiter and Nelson (2010) found that while the majority of Indian young people felt they had achieved adulthood, significant variations existed based on gender, student status, and engagement positions. Their findings revealed that Indian emerging adults emphasized family capacities and relational maturity as criteria for adulthood, reflecting collectivistic cultural values where the self is largely defined through collective identity, with family identity forming a significant component of self-identity.

This cultural context makes privacy and individual autonomy secondary to relationships and interdependence, creating unique challenges for emerging adults from CRMFs who must accomplish developmental tasks while managing stigmatized family backgrounds (Commuri, 2010). The theoretical framework of emerging adulthood, complemented by concepts of *aspiration horizons*, *intersectionality*, and *narrative identity*, provides a robust analytical foundation for addressing the three interconnected research questions from the last section. During emerging adulthood, individuals actively construct integrative life narratives that provide meaning and continuity to their experiences, as

articulated in the narrative identity theory (McAdams, 2011; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Young people from CRMFs must accomplish this developmental task while navigating multiple, sometimes conflicting cultural frameworks and social expectations within cultural contexts that prioritize collective over individual identity formation. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000) offers essential analytical insights into how gender, caste, regional background, economic status, and family composition interact to create unique configurations of advantage and disadvantage for emerging adults from CRMFs. Rather than treating these identity categories as separate factors, intersectional analysis examines how they dynamically interact in specific contexts to shape experiences of inclusion and exclusion (McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006). This approach is particularly valuable for understanding how emerging adults navigate marriage negotiations, educational opportunities, employment prospects, and community participation, as their positioning cannot be understood through any single identity category alone. Also, understanding emerging adults' aspirational development becomes crucial during this period, as Appadurai's (2004) concept of aspirational horizon provides a further framework for examining how social interactions and available resources shape these young people's "capacity to aspire" and pursue different futures within constrained social environments. While previous applications of aspirational horizons theory have primarily focused on economic development and urban contexts (Dalton et al., 2016), its application to marriageability and social positioning in rural contexts represents a significant analytical innovation. This framework allows examination of how emerging adults from CRMFs develop and pursue aspirations for marriage, education, employment, and social mobility despite structural constraints and social stigma, moving beyond deficit-focused approaches to understand their strategic agency and adaptive capacity.

For these emerging adults, their life stage presents unique challenges as they construct self-concepts while managing stigmatized backgrounds and ambiguous social positioning. Unlike peers from established local families, they face questions about marriageability and social acceptability precisely when developing adult identities and making critical life decisions. The intersection of normative developmental tasks with stigmatized family backgrounds creates complex negotiations that require investigation of psychological and social resources these young people develop to navigate challenging circumstances (Bynner, 2005). Understanding these adaptation processes requires attention to resilience and coping strategies (Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2008). Comprehensive analysis of how CRMFs are positioned socio-economically within local hierarchies remains inadequate despite socio-

economic conditions fundamentally shaping life chances and opportunities available to emerging adults from these families (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). The evaluation processes through which different community stakeholders assess these families represent another critical area requiring systematic investigation, as existing research documents general discrimination patterns but lack understanding of how assessments vary across stakeholders and translate into concrete opportunities or constraints (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). The timing is crucial as well because this cohort has reached the age where marriage negotiations typically intensify in rural India. Their experiences provide a unique window into understanding whether CRMs represent temporary demographic adjustments maintaining existing social boundaries or more fundamental transformations creating new forms of belonging. How these young people navigate identity formation and negotiate marriageability within structural constraints offers insights not only into individual experiences but also into broader processes of social change, revealing mechanisms through which social inequality is reproduced or challenged across generations in rapidly transforming rural contexts (Elder, 1998; Shanahan, 2000).

Research Questions

This dissertation addresses critical knowledge gaps regarding CRMFs and their children in rural North India. While focusing on emerging adults' sense of self, marriageability, and aspirations, understanding their experiences requires examining the broader contexts that shape their lives. To comprehensively understand how these emerging adults navigate identity formation and social positioning, this dissertation adopts a multi-perspective approach analyzing their families' socio-economic characteristics and community stakeholders' evaluation processes.

Three interconnected research questions guide this research:

1. What do the socio-economic conditions of CRMFs reveal about their positioning within rural North India's social and economic landscape?
2. How do parents, village-elected leaders (*Sarpanches*), and local government officials evaluate the marriageability and social positioning of emerging adults from CRMFs?
3. How do emerging adults from CRMFs describe their sense of self and marriageability, and how do social interactions and available resources shape their aspirations?

An Overview of Methodology

This doctoral dissertation employed a mixed methods research design to examine the complex social realities of CRMFs in rural North India (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

The methodological framework evolved from an initial qualitative design to a more comprehensive framework integrating qualitative and quantitative elements, reflecting the adaptive nature of contemporary social research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The dissertation draws on critical realism (Bhaskar, 1978; Sayer, 2010), which provides a framework for understanding how individual agency operates within broader structural constraints. This philosophical orientation bridges interpretive qualitative research traditions with the recognition that social phenomena exist independently of our knowledge while acknowledging that our understanding is mediated through socially constructed meanings.

Initially, the dissertation was designed as interpretive qualitative research using biographical narrative interviews (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This approach conceptualized narrative inquiry as "a way of understanding experience" occurring through time, place, and social interaction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). However, the pilot study conducted between July and September 2022 revealed significant methodological challenges that necessitated a fundamental reconsideration of the research approach. Participants struggled to provide detailed narratives, family members' presence constrained interviews, and sample size limitations emerged. These field realities highlighted the need for methodological adaptation based on empirical conditions rather than predetermined frameworks (see Ankit, 2024). In response to these challenges, the dissertation evolved into an embedded mixed methods design where qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously, with one form supporting the other (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This methodological shift was informed by Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner's (2007) conceptualization of mixed methods research as combining elements of both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide more comprehensive understanding than either approach alone. The integration of quantitative socio-economic data alongside qualitative interviews addressed the need for convergent validity through multiple measurement methods (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). This approach recognized that understanding emerging adults from CRMFs required both personal narratives and systematic documentation of structural conditions, including economic positioning, educational access, and community acceptance, that shaped their life trajectories. Data collection employed methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978)

through differentiated interview approaches and systematic collection of socio-economic indicators. In-depth interviews were conducted with emerging adults and Sarpanches, while semi-structured interviews were conducted with CRMF mothers and fathers, government officials, and community members (Bernard, 2002; Biesta, 2010). In total, 76 participants were interviewed across these various categories. This approach recognized the "multiplicity of stories" characterizing any research context, requiring attention to individual, social, cultural, and institutional narratives simultaneously (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Data analysis followed a qualitative-dominated mixed-methods approach where quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately before integration during the analysis phase (Fielding & Schreier, 2001). The quantitative socio-economic data was integrated into qualitative analysis to provide contextual depth and validation of emerging patterns, maintaining the qualitative dominance of the overall design while enhancing analytical rigor through methodological complementarity. The descriptive statistical analysis was conducted using Jeffery's Amazing Statistical Program (JASP), an open-source software, and thematic analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti, following the process of coding data into categories and subsequently developing overarching themes (Charmaz, 2003; Saldaña, 2016). For CRMF fathers and community members, manual coding was employed due to the smaller number of interviews in these categories (Basit, 2003).

The dissertation's ethical framework incorporated considerations of power relations, representation, and reciprocity particularly relevant when working with marginalized communities (Christians, 2005). It adopted a reflexive stance acknowledging the researcher's positionality as both insider and outsider within the research context, following recommendations for decolonizing research methodologies (Smith, 1999).

Positionality: My Reflexive Personal Stance

In conducting this research, I recognized the imperative of articulating my personal stance, positionality, and reflexivity (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Personal stance encompasses deeply held attitudes and core values regarding what constitutes significance, derived from personal characteristics and constructed over time, fundamentally influencing research-related decisions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). My personal stance was informed by core values, experiential background, cultural and social positioning, professional influences, and ideological perspectives. The research location was strategically selected based on my

personal insider status (Adler & Adler, 1987; Bennett, 2003; Brewer, 2000; Edwards, 2001) which provided extensively documented advantages for conducting mixed-methods research from an insider position.

I was raised in a village proximate to the Narnaul block where this research was conducted and am a member of the Ahir caste, a landowning caste that maintains local dominance in southern Haryana. While I maintained insider status within the community, my familial background did not encompass CRM dynamics, as both my parents originate from villages within close geographic proximity. I resided in the village until completing secondary education in 2011, subsequently living outside the region and internationally for higher education and professional opportunities, resulting in a degree of temporal and spatial separation from the local community. My research interest in CRMFs emerged during professional engagement with rural self-help groups (SHGs) and local self-government institutions in Tripura, on the border with Bangladesh, far away from Haryana. I encountered families who had arranged marriages between their daughters and men from Haryana, which generated scholarly interest in understanding such matrimonial arrangements within the context of Haryana's demographic sex ratio imbalance and faraway location. Despite lacking prior interaction with such families before the pilot study in Haryana, I embarked upon this dissertation motivated by concerns regarding potential exploitation of women in such families and a commitment to social justice. This perspective enabled an approach characterized by honesty and accountability, seeking to illuminate the lived realities of these families. Navigating insider research undoubtedly presented both methodological and ethical complexities (Chacko & George, 2004). I maintained natural social interactions, possessed fluency in the local Haryanvi dialect, and leveraged deeper cultural understanding through prior knowledge, recognizing advantages of insider positioning (Roseneil, 1993; Adler & Adler, 1994). This facilitated regular information exchange within the field, comprehensive examination of social actors, and more efficient participant selection and access, and I established rapport and trust more expeditiously with participants (Gerrish, 1997). Insider researchers are said to be uniquely positioned to comprehend experiences of groups to which they belong and can engage participants more effectively, utilizing shared experiences to generate richer data (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). However, these advantages were not absolute, as ethical responsibilities to the community remained paramount. Insider researchers may as well experience difficulty separating personal experiences from participant narratives and must confront questions regarding potential bias (Serrant-Green, 2002; Kanuha, 2000).

Positionality encompasses the position a researcher adopts within a study relative to the subject, participants, and research context or process (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). It incorporates ontological, epistemological, and human nature and agency assumptions (Sikes, 2004; Bahari, 2010). My exploration of CRMFs commenced with existing literature emphasizing women's lived experiences, frequently highlighting adjustment challenges. Upon recognizing the literature gap regarding children's experiences within these families, I resolved to concentrate on children during both the pilot and main research phases. Initially, I lacked concrete research questions, as reflected in a journal publication during the dissertation (Ankit, 2024). My dissertation evolved to encompass diverse participants: emerging adults from CRMFs, their parents, Sarpanches or the *Sarpanches*, community members, and government officers. I conducted interviews with 76 individuals in total, with my relationship to participants varying according to interview context.

However, significant methodological challenges emerged during fieldwork that necessitated substantial adaptations to my research approach. Despite my insider status, linguistic fluency, and researcher credentials from an international institution, I encountered considerable difficulties in locating and accessing emerging adults for interviews. Family members demonstrated reluctance to accommodate interview requests, and cultural norms presented substantial barriers. Most households contained only mothers-in-law or women from CRMFs during daytime hours, and my male gender precluded appropriate interaction with these women according to local cultural expectations. Being an insider, possessing linguistic competency, and maintaining researcher status based in Poland provided no advantage in these circumstances, as I remained a stranger to these families. This impasse led to the strategic decision to engage a female field researcher, Mrs. Dayawati, an adaptation that emerged organically during the project itself. This collaboration enabled focus on the Narnaul block, encompassing 52 villages in total. The female field researcher proposed a systematic village-by-village approach to identify such families and emerging adults, subsequently facilitating initial telephonic contact prior to family visits. Over approximately four months, she identified 497 CRMFs. During this period, I concurrently interviewed community members and Sarpanches, who proved more accessible through initial telephonic contact, particularly as the female field researcher had already established rapport with them during data collection activities. I documented data collected in Excel spreadsheets daily. Following data collection completion, I contacted families with emerging adults, 25 in total, and arranged visits. Ultimately, I successfully interviewed 17 emerging adults, representing a

reasonable yield given the methodological constraints. Although the female field researcher also encountered challenges during data collection, her status as a completely local woman, combined with support from block-level government officials who issued formal letters to all villages endorsing this research, facilitated successful identification of CRMFs in the region.

Reflexivity constitutes a process enabling researchers to consider their position and influence throughout the study while understanding how they construct and sometimes impose meanings upon the research process (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Throughout my research, I maintained reflexivity regarding body language and interview approach. I consistently initiated interactions with informal conversation to establish rapport and ease participant comfort, encouraging openness by emphasizing the absence of correct or incorrect responses. I reciprocated by sharing personal information when invited. With CRMF parents, I occupied an outsider position due to my non-CRMF background and status as an international researcher. These variables created challenges for some participants in relating to my experience. Ochieng (2010) observed that insider/outsider status can shift during the research process. Although treated as an individual possessing insider knowledge, I was not invariably regarded as belonging to their community. However, my insider status enabled empathetic understanding. I maintained that similarity and difference constitute neither unitary nor fixed categories and can shift throughout dissertation (Ochieng, 2010). In interviews with emerging adults (18-25 years), my advanced age and male gender presented cultural challenges, particularly with young women. Rethe dissertation cultural norms discourage interaction between young men and women, necessitating interviews in the presence of family members, typically mothers, within open areas of homes. For male participants, private interviews proved more feasible but remained subject to family oversight. The rarity of researchers visiting homes generated curiosity and supervision from family members.

Interviews with Sarpanches proceeded more comfortably. Sharing similar caste and gender characteristics, I was perceived as an insider, facilitating more open and comprehensive conversations. Shared cultural background and informal village connections enabled rapport building and candid discussions. Conversely, interactions with government officers maintained formal, time-constrained characteristics, necessitating focused and semi-structured approaches. My dual status as both a local and international researcher facilitated initial connections and credibility establishment, particularly with officers of different

genders. Casual interactions with village or community members presented no significant challenges, enabling maintenance of researcher positioning without excessive informality.

Initially inspired by existing literature and biographical narrative interviews, I adopted a qualitative purist approach to research context and methodology. Polish sociology's emphasis on narrative methods influenced this approach. However, as detailed in Chapter 3, this method proved inadequate. Consequently, I adopted a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative data collection through the female field researcher's assistance. This mixed approach enhanced study comprehensiveness, enabling balance between qualitative insights and quantitative data while facilitating participant identification and reducing concerns regarding appropriate individual location. I employed semi-structured and in-depth interview formats tailored to each participant group. I maintained respectful adherence to local culture and customs, including appropriate elder greetings and respectful seating arrangements. For instance, when older interviewees occupied beds, I positioned myself at the foot to demonstrate deference. I avoided emphasizing my status as a researcher from a foreign university, striving for objectivity while maintaining conversational focus. I permitted interviewees adequate time for response formulation without interruption, posing follow-up inquiries only upon response completion. Maintaining a comprehensive field diary proved crucial as well. I documented intricate details, including interviewee eye contact, confidence levels, and third-party presence during interviews. I recorded the impact of others' presence on conversational dynamics. I aimed to encompass as many of the 52 villages as possible to ensure geographical diversity and representation across different castes.

I did not routinely mention my caste during conversations, discussing it only when interviewees initiated such inquiries. This approach proved critical in maintaining an objective stance while exercising reflexivity regarding my influence on the research process. Understanding and acknowledging these elements remained crucial for ensuring transparent integration of my deeply held beliefs, values, and experiences into the research process.

Significance Beyond the Indian Context

The first academic focus on cross-border marriages (CBMs) stemmed from demographic concerns that were evident in various Asian societies, particularly the East Asia comprising China, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, primarily. As documented in India and China, pervasive son preference intersecting with rapid fertility decline substantially skewed

sex ratios in these societies (Das Gupta et al., 2003; Choe, 1987; Guilmoto, 2009; Hudson & Boer, 2004). In South Korea, sex ratios at birth (SRB) began rising markedly in the mid-1980s with the proliferation of sex-selective technologies and ultrasound accessibility (Das Gupta et al., 2003; Park & Cho, 1995; Chung & Das Gupta, 2007). Family ideologies rooted in patriarchal *Confucian* values (see Glossary), combined with rigid patrilineal kinship systems, intensified societal pressure on men to marry and produce sons to ensure familial continuity and ancestral rites (Das Gupta et al., 2003; Park & Cho, 1995; Kim, 2007). As the marriageable female population declined and women increasingly rejected rural-agrarian lifestyles and marriage itself, a "marriage squeeze" similar to that of North India emerged across the East Asian countryside, particularly evident in small towns and rural communities in Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Jones & Shen, 2008; Nauck & Klaus, 2007; Piper, 2003; Freeman, 2005). It is within this demographic and social context that marriage migration became increasingly significant across the entire region. By the 1990s, brokerage agencies intermediated tens of thousands of marriages annually between East Asian men and Southeast Asian or Chinese women, creating what scholars termed a "regional marriage market" (Wang & Chang, 2002; Piper & Roces, 2003; Constable, 2005; Thai, 2008). For example, over 100,000 Vietnamese women married Taiwanese men in the decade following the mid-1990s, fundamentally altering the demographic composition of rural Taiwan (Wang & Chang, 2002; Bélanger & Linh, 2011; Hsiao-Chuan, 2008). Similarly, in South Korea, by the 2010s, almost 10% of all marriages were classified as "international" or "multiethnic," with the vast majority involving rural Korean men and women from Vietnam, China, or the Philippines (Seol et al., 2006; Kim, 2010; Yoon, 2012). In Japan, the trend was more concentrated in rural prefectures facing acute aging and population decline, with rising marriages to women from China, the Philippines, and Thailand (Tsuneyoshi, 2010; Suzuki, 2003; Faier, 2009; Satake & da Silva, 2008).

Sociological research has analyzed these CBMs through multiple theoretical and empirical frameworks. Early scholarship often debated whether these marriages represented opportunities for women's agency and mobility or constituted new forms of commodification and trafficking (Piper & Roces, 2003; Constable, 2005; Thai, 2008; Brennan, 2004). Piper (1999, 2003) influentially argued that the boundaries between marriage migration, labor migration, and trafficking remain fundamentally blurred, especially in poorly regulated markets where agencies, motivated primarily by profit, play pivotal roles in matching brides and grooms across national boundaries. Some agencies operated under legal frameworks and

governmental safeguards, but others descended into outright exploitation and systematic abuse (Robinson, 1996; Simons, 2001; Suzuki, 2000). Extensive fieldwork led studies on Vietnamese brides in Taiwan, Chinese brides in Korea, and Filipina brides in Japan and Hong Kong have documented a remarkably diverse range of experiences and challenged simplistic victimization narratives while acknowledging structural constraints (Constable, 2005; Seol et al., 2006; Tsai, 2011; Thai, 2008; Faier, 2009). Many women migrated under considerable social and economic pressure from their natal families, compounded by local stigmatization of unmarried womanhood, persistent poverty, limited local marriage prospects, and cultural expectations for daughters to financially support their kin (Thai, 2008; Freeman, 2005). In Vietnam and the Philippines, the commodification of women through marriage agencies was periodically debated publicly as a source of national shame and objectification, though many families considered overseas marriages as legitimate, indeed, often as highly desirable, routes to upward mobility and transnational connections (Jones & Ramdas, 2004; Constable, 2003; Tolentino, 1996). Research conducted in sending countries has thus emphasized both macro-level structural pressures (poverty, rural economic decline, lack of local prospects, gender inequality) and micro-level negotiations about migration, agency, and familial obligation (Skeldon, 2011; Thai, 2008; Piper, 2003; Hugo, 2005). In bride-receiving countries, a critical research theme has been the complex adjustment processes of "foreign brides" to new linguistic, social, and familial environments and their roles in reproducing or challenging existing gender and family hierarchies (Seol et al., 2006; Kim, 2010; Suzuki, 2003), again similar to that of North India. Bride adjustment experiences demonstrate remarkable variability: some face acute social isolation, severely limited access to language instruction, domestic violence, and absence of legal protections; others successfully leverage their positions to become community brokers or catalysts for change, especially as their numbers increased and mutual support networks emerged (Constable, 2005; Tsai, 2011; Kim, 2007; Faier, 2009). Sociologists have been particularly attuned to the ways national identity, citizenship, and belonging are contested and negotiated for these foreign wives and their families (Suzuki, 2003). Many states, attempting to "assimilate" or manage international marriages, have implemented language and cultural integration programs, legal reforms, and, at times, exclusionary or explicitly racialized discourse about immigrant women and their perceived threats to national homogeneity (Jones & Shen, 2008; Tsai, 2011; Kim, 2010; Yoon, 2012). In South Korea, early state neglect gradually transformed into comprehensive "multicultural family policies," which ambiguously alternated between inclusion and

surveillance, simultaneously seeking to integrate families while containing imagined "threats" to cultural homogeneity (Seol et al., 2006).

Beginning in the 2010s, a significant shift in the research agenda moved analytical focus from “foreign brides” to the children of CBMs, prompted by the realization that these children, often called “multicultural children,” or “hafu” in Japan, and “damunhwa” in Korea, were coming of age and entering public schooling systems and the workforce (Wu, Bradley, & Chiang, 2011; Tsai, 2011; Park & Lee, 2014; Tsuneyoshi, 2010; Okamoto, 2014). Research themes focusing on children have proven notably richer and more theoretically sophisticated than comparable analyses in the North Indian context, offering valuable comparative insights for understanding CRMFs globally. A key concern dominating the literature has been the school adaptation and educational attainment of children in these multicultural families, examining how institutional structures either facilitate or hinder their academic and social integration (Wu, Bradley, & Chiang, 2011; Park & Lee, 2014; Tsuneyoshi, 2010; Chen & Bennett, 2013). Studies conducted in Korea have systematically explored how language barriers, peer discrimination, and parental marginalization significantly affect children’s academic performance and psychological well-being (Yang & Lu, 2010; Park & Lee, 2014; Kim, 2010). Substantial evidence documents bullying and social stigmatization attached to children with foreign mothers, particularly in rural areas where ethnic and linguistic differences are most visible and least accepted (Park & Lee, 2014; Yoon, 2012). In many documented cases, mothers’ lack of proficiency in local languages fundamentally limits their ability to assist children academically and socially, compounding children's institutional exclusion and social marginalization (Wu, Bradley, & Chiang, 2011; Kim, 2007; Okamoto, 2014). Another significant research theme centers on identity negotiation processes among children from cross-border marriage families (CBMFs). These children often face dual or fundamentally ambiguous identities, sometimes celebrated as bicultural assets, sometimes denigrated as “other” or “not really Japanese/Korean/Taiwanese” by peers and institutions (Tsai, 2011; Wu, Bradley, & Chiang, 2011; Tsuneyoshi, 2010; Okamoto, 2014; Faier, 2009). Research consistently finds that children often become cultural and linguistic brokers for their mothers and extended families, translating, interpreting, and helping navigate public institutions and bureaucratic systems (Tsuneyoshi, 2010; Wu, Bradley, & Chiang, 2011; Park & Lee, 2014; Chen & Bennett, 2013). This process of “parentification” can bring both pride and precarity, with children bearing substantial familial responsibility at remarkably young ages (Park & Lee, 2014).

Parental aspirations and educational strategies constitute another major analytical thread throughout literature. CBMF Mothers, especially those from Vietnam, the Philippines, and rural China, are frequently found to maintain high ambitions for their children's educational and social integration, but their efforts are systematically thwarted by local prejudice, lack of institutional resources, and educational system inflexibility (Tsai, 2011; Wu, Bradley, & Chiang, 2011; Thai, 2008; Bélanger & Linh, 2011). CBMF Fathers, mostly significantly older and less educationally engaged, may either actively support or inadvertently hinder children's educational opportunities, with research consistently noting that the intersection of class position, geography (urban versus rural), and family dynamics is greatly relevant for outcomes (Park & Lee, 2014; Wu, Bradley, & Chiang, 2011; Kim, 2010; Suzuki, 2003). Matters of policy and social service responses have been extensively studied across the region, revealing significant variation in governmental approaches to integration and support. Governments in Korea and Taiwan, for example, have launched targeted educational programs, language support initiatives, and comprehensive social integration campaigns for both mothers and children, with varying degrees of documented effectiveness (Chen & Bennett, 2013). Civil society actors, including NGOs, religious organizations, and mutual aid groups, play increasingly important complementary roles in supporting families and advocating for expanded rights and recognition (Tsai, 2011; Wu, Bradley, & Chiang, 2011; Kim, 2007; Faier, 2009). Comparative studies systematically highlight significant differentiation across countries and within societies regarding acceptance and integration of cross-border families, revealing how local contexts fundamentally shape outcomes (Jones & Shen, 2008; Constable, 2005; Thai, 2008). Urban schools may provide substantially more support and encounter less overt discrimination, whereas rural communities may simultaneously rely more heavily on foreign wives for demographic replenishment while paradoxically resisting meaningful social inclusion (Tsuneyoshi, 2010; Seol et al., 2006; Park & Lee, 2014; Yoon, 2012).

Current research, however, has begun tracking the longitudinal trajectories of children in these CBMFs, documenting not only persistent challenges but also instances of successful bicultural integration, bilingualism, and remarkable upward mobility (Wu, Bradley, & Chiang, 2011; Tsai, 2011; Okamoto, 2014; Chen & Bennett, 2013). For example, Wu et al. (2011) systematically demonstrated how some children successfully capitalize on their "transnational capital," including language abilities, knowledge of multiple cultures, and family ties across national borders, to access educational and labor market opportunities

unavailable to their monolingual and monocultural peers. Yet significant research gaps remain across the region. While abundant research now explores experiences of mothers and children, especially within school settings, substantially more ethnographic and life course research is needed to understand adult outcomes, including labor market pathways, intermarriage patterns, political participation, and intergenerational mobility (Wu, Bradley, & Chiang, 2011; Tsai, 2011; Park & Lee, 2014; Okamoto, 2014). Some scholars increasingly call for more intersectional analytical approaches, systematically considering how class position, gender, region, ethnicity, and citizenship status interact to shape both vulnerabilities and resources within these families (Park & Lee, 2014; Thai, 2008). In sum, sociological research conducted in East Asia has made significant empirical and theoretical strides in understanding the complex challenges and social transformations posed by cross-border marriages, providing robust quantitative data and ethnographic analysis on both spousal integration and children's developmental experiences. The sustained analytical focus on children, especially as they mature into adulthood, provides a valuable methodological and theoretical model for research in other regions, such as rural North India, where similar demographic transitions are occurring but child-centered scholarly analysis remains in its infancy (Wu, Bradley, & Chiang, 2011; Jones & Shen, 2008; Tsai, 2011; Park & Lee, 2014). The nuanced empirical findings on bicultural identity formation, educational attainment, social stigma, and family dynamics documented in East Asia highlight both the importance and promise of adopting a generational approach for future research on families formed through cross-regional marriage arrangements globally.

Despite the substantial scholarly attention devoted to children, critical analytical gaps persist that this research addresses both within the East Asian context and through comparative analysis with the Indian experience. While sociological, anthropological, and demographic research has increasingly produced extensive literature on educational outcomes, identity formation, and policy responses, several fundamental dimensions remain underexplored across both regional contexts. Most significantly, the socio-economic characteristics of CBMFs have received insufficient analytical attention, even after decades of studies on marriage-led migration. The East Asian literature, while rich in documenting children’s school experiences and cultural adaptation, has not systematically examined how these families are positioned within local economic hierarchies, their asset accumulation patterns, employment trajectories, or access to social services and government-policy programs. This represents a critical gap in understanding the structural foundations that shape

children's life chances and community integration possibilities. Similarly, community stakeholder perspectives, particularly regarding the social positioning of children and their marriageability prospects, have been inadequately theorized and empirically documented in the East Asian context. While research has documented discrimination and stigmatization in educational settings, the broader community evaluation processes through which social boundaries are constructed and maintained around these families remain largely unexplored. Most critically, the focus on emerging adults as a distinct analytical category, particularly regarding their sense of self and marriageability construction, is completely absent from the East Asian literature. Research has concentrated primarily on school-age children or has treated "children" as a homogeneous category without recognizing the particular challenges and opportunities facing emerging adults (18-25 years) as they navigate identity formation, romantic relationships, and marriage prospects. The intersection of stigmatized family origins with marriageability concerns, a central life course transition in both East Asian and Indian contexts, remains theoretically underdeveloped and empirically unexplored. Furthermore, the comparative potential between East Asian CBM contexts and the Indian CRM phenomenon has been entirely overlooked in existing scholarship. This represents a significant theoretical gap, as both contexts share similar demographic drivers (skewed sex ratios, son preference, rural marriage squeeze), involve women's migration for marriage purposes, and produce similar questions about children's social positioning and integration. The marriage migration literature has remained largely regionally bounded, missing opportunities for theoretical advancement through comparative analysis of how different cultural, institutional, and economic contexts shape family experiences and outcomes.

This doctoral dissertation directly addresses these multifaceted gaps by providing a systematic analysis of family socioeconomic positioning, community stakeholder evaluation processes, and emerging adult identity construction in Indian CRM contexts. By focusing specifically on emerging adults' sense of self and marriageability, dimensions entirely absent from existing East Asian research, this project contributes novel theoretical insights applicable across both regional contexts. The multi-perspective analytical framework developed here, encompassing structural conditions, community assessment mechanisms, and individual agency, provides a methodological template for advancing research on cross-border marriage families globally. Moreover, this research establishes crucial comparative connections between Indian CRMs and East Asian CBMs, filling a significant gap in the marriage migration literature. By demonstrating how demographic pressures, family

strategies, and community responses operate across different cultural and institutional contexts, this study expands theoretical understanding of marriage migration as a global phenomenon while providing empirically grounded insights into the specific dynamics shaping emerging adult experiences in rural North India. The extensive body of empirical research on CBMFs in East Asia thus provides both crucial foundations and illuminates persistent gaps that this research addresses.

Structure of This Dissertation

This dissertation begins with an introductory chapter and proceeds systematically through empirical analysis to conclusions and recommendations. The introductory chapter presents the research questions guiding this study, my positionality as a researcher, methodology overview, background context, and establishes the research need.

Chapter 1 establishes foundational context through sociological perspectives on marriage and family in rural North India, descriptions of key Hindu marriage rituals, and examination of parent-arranged partner selection criteria. This framework provides necessary background for understanding the research context.

Chapter 2 examines the demographic crisis of persistently low sex ratios creating a marriage squeeze that disrupted traditional matrimonial norms and led to CRMs (CRMs). It reviews current research, identifies the significant gap in scholarship on CRMF children, and contextualizes this through similar phenomena in East Asian cross-border marriages, demonstrating the broader importance of studying CRMFs and their children.

Chapter 3 presents the methodological framework: research design, participant recruitment, research locale, and the conceptual framework guided by a wide array of concepts including narrative identity, looking-glass self, stigma, prejudice, social and cultural capitals, intersectionality, aspirational horizons, and social evaluation**.** It concludes with data analysis techniques and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 opens empirical analysis by examining CRMFs' socio-economic characteristics in Narnaul region, providing quantitative foundation for understanding participants' voices and community contexts in subsequent qualitative chapters.

Chapter 5 presents qualitative analysis of perspectives from CRMF parents, Sarpanches, and local government officials, examining how these stakeholders engage in "sympathetic stratification" and "anticipatory social evaluation" regarding CRMFs' positioning and emerging adults' marriageability prospects.

Chapter 6 concludes empirical analysis with short, summarized life narratives of 17 emerging adults, followed by thematic synthesis focusing on their sense of self and marriageability. This chapter explores how emerging adults demonstrate "bounded agency" as they navigate identity formation and aspirations within structural constraints.

The dissertation concludes with discussion of findings, policy recommendations for multicultural family centers, and reflections on research contributions and future directions.

Chapter 1: Negotiating Marriage and Family in Rural North India: Sociological Contexts, Rituals, and the Marriage Market

> "A man alone is nothing, as he is incomplete. The perfect man is the one who is completely united in harmony with his wife and children."
>
> (Manu, 1991, 9.45)

In this chapter, I adopt a deliberately descriptive approach, with minimal analytical drift, to contextualizing marriage and family within the sociological landscape of rural North India, prioritizing comprehensive background information over theoretical arguments. Rather than seeking to address existing gaps in the literature, I use this foundational analysis for a strategic purpose: to establish the essential social, cultural, and institutional frameworks that will prove critical for understanding the emergence and reception of CRMs that I examine in subsequent chapters. The descriptive approach I employ here allows for the systematic introduction of key local terms, practices, and meanings that are often taken for granted in specialized literature but require careful explanation for readers unfamiliar with the complex dynamics that characterize rural North Indian marriage systems.

I have structured this chapter through detailed examination of sociological perspectives on family organization, documentation of Hindu marriage rituals, and analysis of how parent-arranged marriages work in practice. This treatment covers the fundamental institutions that shape rural marriage practices, from village governance through *Gram Panchayats* (village councils) and the parallel authority of *Khap Panchayats* (traditional caste-based councils) to the intricate rules of caste endogamy, *gotra* exogamy (see Glossary), and kinship networks that determine eligible partners. The detailed attention I pay to Hindu marriage rituals and community participation in traditional ceremonies serves a particularly important purpose for my broader argument. These ritual sequences, involving extended family networks, village-wide participation, and elaborate ceremonial displays, function not merely as cultural performances but as mechanisms of social integration and legitimation. I argue that understanding the centrality of these collective rituals to marriage validation becomes crucial when examining CRMs, which often occur with minimal ceremonial elaboration and limited community involvement. The absence or reduction of these traditional ritual frameworks represents more than mere procedural simplification; it fundamentally undermines the social mechanisms through which marriages are typically

recognized, accepted, and integrated into existing kinship networks. This ritual deficit, combined with the violation of established endogamous principles, helps explain why CRMs face persistent social marginalization despite addressing the demographic pressures created by skewed sex ratios and the resulting male marriage squeeze in regions like Haryana that I will explore in the following chapter.

1.1 Contextual Sociological Perspectives on Marriage and Family in Rural North India

Fisher (1992) states that families and marriages are fundamental institutions in all societies, and a marital companion is typically essential to the basic family unit. However, the organization of these institutions is subject to change alongside and varies across various cultures. Westermarck (1891) outlined marriage as "a durable connection and relationship between male and female, lasting beyond the mere act of propagation and the birth of offspring" in his seminal work on marriage. Horton and Hunt (1964) described marriage as the social framework that permits two or more individuals to constitute a family. Marriage also establishes a legally and socially recognized partnership between individuals, which is the basis for the formation of a family (MacDorman, 1987). In some cultures, marriage is viewed as the expansion of an existing family, akin to a branch sprouting from a thriving tree with a rich history, while in others, a new family is believed to be established when two individuals unite (Quah, 2008). Historical accounts from various international communities (Braudel, 1973; Yang, 1959; Gies & Gies, 1987; Casey, 1989; Dai, 1990) demonstrate that marriage can be considered a significant life event for a variety of reasons, primarily can be categorized as social and personal. The personal objective is to safeguard the emotional stability of the individual, while the social objective is to ensure the socio-economic stability and advancement of the family, community, and kin (Quah, 1998).

In the past, sociologists offered extensive definitions of a family, highlighting its fundamental characteristics and functions within a society, while marriage remained the primary method of organizing families in the overwhelming majority of societies. David M. Klein and James M. White (1996) underscored the critical characteristics of families, including their intergenerational nature, the presence of both biological and affinal connections, and the fact that they typically have a longer lifespan than the majority of other social groups. Additionally, families connect individuals to a broad network of kinship. Mary Ann Lamanna and Agnes Riedmann (2009) described a family as "any sexually expressive or parent-child or other kin relationship in which people, typically related by ancestry, marriage, or adoption, (1) form an economic unit and care for any young, (2) consider their identity to

be significantly attached to the group, and (3) commit to maintaining that group over time." In the subsequent segment, I will analyze marriage and family further as universal institutions from sociological perspectives, integrating these concepts into the cultural nuances of rural North India, where marriage is mandatory and bachelorhood is actively discouraged. The decision to draw upon five major perspectives—functionalist, symbolic interactionist, family development, conflict, and postmodern—arises from the need to account for both the persistence and transformation of marriage and family life in the region. The inclusion of all these perspectives reflects a deliberate orientation toward plurality rather than reliance on a single theoretical lens. I detail the chosen perspectives below.

1.1.1 Functionalist Perspective

The functionalist perspective underscores the essential role of marriage and family institutions in the domains of sexual, reproductive, economic, and educational functioning to maintain social order and continuity. These roles encompass the provision of emotional security, responsible child upbringing, and financial support to members, all of which are essential for the continuity of society across generations (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2009; Murdock, 1949). In rural North India, the *joint family*, also referred to as an extended family (see Glossary), is a communal living arrangement that frequently includes multiple generations. It offers both emotional and practical assistance in the management of daily responsibilities and the rearing of children (Parsons & Bales, 1955). By guaranteeing that property, values, and customs are transmitted through the generations, this collaborative approach not only assists individuals in surmounting challenges but also preserves the continuity and stability of rural communities. In the socialization of children and the transmission of cultural values and traditions, elderly family members, particularly grandparents, are of paramount importance. Grandparents frequently offer emotional aid, discipline, and practical support in joint family systems. For instance, the family structure in Haryana serves as an illustration of this viewpoint practically. In rural Haryana, the average household size was 4.5 individuals, defined as a group of people, whether related or not, who typically live in the same residence and share a kitchen; according to the Periodic Labor Force Survey (PLFS) 2023, 52.5% of rural families were nuclear while 47.5% were joint (see Table 1).

Table 1

Family Structure in Haryana, 2022-23

	Nuclear Family (%)	**Joint Family (%)**	**Average Household Size**
Rural	52.5	47.5	4.8
Urban	67.5	32.5	4.1
Total	58.1	41.9	4.5

Note: Data from Periodic Labour Force Survey 2022-23, by National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, 2023 (National Sample Survey Office, 2023).

According to this viewpoint, conventional family structures in rural areas continue to be significant, where self-employment and traditional occupations are common, agricultural activities necessitate teamwork, and the joint family offers both social support and financial security, despite the socioeconomic shift toward nuclear families in urban areas (Singh & Singh, 2024).

The basic social unit, the village, is typically made up of several extended families living close to one another. The *Gram Panchayat*, or the lowest level of local self-government, is the focal point of social life (Gaiha & Kulkarni, 2002). It is an elected traditional body of several members for a village that mediates conflicts, plans community activities, upholds social norms, and settles disputes to ensure that rural society runs smoothly (Rajasekhar et al., 2018). Overseeing local administration, including road upkeep, water supply, sanitation, and welfare program implementation, it operates as a grassroots democratic organization that ensures representation and involvement in governance (Kumar, 2019). A Sarpanch is the head and primary authority of this village government, and each Gram Panchayat is divided into multiple *mohallas*, or wards, with a *panch*, or a ward member elected by the villagers for each of them (Singh, 2003).

Arranged marriages, which are a complex interweaving of social norms and familial networks, are not merely unions between two individuals, but also strategic connections between families and their social status (Banerjee et al., 2009; Tahir, 2021). In these marriages, the bride and groom are selected by parents or family members rather than the individuals themselves. For parents who initiate the process of arranging marriages for their

children, the primary point of contact is typically within their immediate social network including fellow villagers, local relatives, and prominent community members or leaders, such as the Sarpanch, who may have extensive connections (Kukreja, 2017). One of the most salient characteristics of these arranged marriages is the overwhelming emphasis on marrying within the same caste to preserve family honor and social network cohesion, assure compatibility of values and customs, and maintain cultural continuity. According to Ambedkar (1916), the practice of endogamy is the sole attribute that is unique to caste, and the caste system's historical and social significance, which regulates social hierarchy, purity, and group boundaries through caste identity, is the reason for the preservation of this norm (Banerjee et al., 2009). Mandatory hypergamous marriages are socially enforced unions in which women from lower-status families are required to marry into higher-status lineages, thereby institutionalizing caste and patrilineal hierarchies (Parry, 1979). Villages rigorously enforce the other fundamental marriage law of village and gotra exogamy based on the belief that individuals from the same gotra share a common ancestor and thus are brothers and sisters (Bhatnagar & Agrawal, 2002; Chowdhry, 2007). This rule is adhered to by the entire village community as a matter of honor and custom (Kaur, 2010). Subsequently, in order to foster social unity, expand familial bonds, and prevent inbreeding, only marriages between members of distinct villages are arranged. Complying with marriage and gender norms is the primary method of sustaining family *izzat* (honor), which is considered essential for a family's reputation and status within the village (Chaudhry, 2016). Furthermore, arranged marriages are intended to maintain social structures by promoting alliances between families, preserving community values, and preserving hierarchy and group loyalty, rather than solely emphasizing individual choice or romantic autonomy.

Nevertheless, the functional perspective has been criticized for perpetuating an image of harmonious families defined by shared values, omitting to consider gender inequality and power dynamics, spousal or parent-child conflict, and even family violence (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2009). It is frequently disregarded by this perspective that what is advantageous to one group may not be advantageous to another.

1.1.2 Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, a family is the primary context in which an individual's self-concept and identity are formed through direct interactions and collective experiences (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2009). The self is believed to develop through social

interactions, particularly through role-taking and the use of shared symbols such as language, rituals, and kinship terms (Mead, 1934).

Daily interactions in rural North India maintain and reinforce traditional gender roles and family hierarchies. Men often engage in agricultural work or in services, while women typically handle domestic duties and child-rearing (Shukla, 2015). Through observation and participation in joint family activities, children pick up these roles and internalize the norms and behaviors associated with their gender and social standing (Fiese et al., 2003). Such behaviors increase the sense of security and belonging that they experience (Bossard & Boll, 1943). Everyday life in such a joint family is characterized by a complex network of defined roles and relationships, in which each member's status and responsibilities contribute to sustaining social harmony and collective identity (Chadha, 2004). The village functions as a social arena where these familial roles are both enacted and observed, reflecting and reinforcing shared cultural values and community cohesion (Béteille, 1980). Older men typically dominate public spaces like the *chaupal* (a village community's designated meeting place) and other main streets, reinforcing patriarchal power (Chowdhry, 2014). Women are largely excluded: when they do appear, they remain veiled, deferential, and invisible. This spatial segregation, which confines women to the domestic sphere and denies them a voice in communal authority, both reflects and sustains gender hierarchies (Chowdhry, 2014).

Arranged marriages as well constitute more than mere formal transactions; they encompass a sequence of social interactions, including meetings, symbols, rituals, and negotiations, which facilitate the establishment of identities and relationships for families and individuals (Gupta et al., 2021). In most parts, *ghunghat* (see Glossary) operates as a ritual during life-cycle events and everyday social interactions, wherein a married woman covers her head, and often her face, in the presence of senior males, designed to reinforce gender roles and respect for tradition, marking the transition to marital status and reinforcing familial honor (Chowdhry, 2017). For instance, this ghunghat is not merely a piece of cloth; it is a potent symbol that influences the manner in which newly married women interact with elders and assert their identity within the household and outside (Chaudhry, 2016). On the contrary, girls born in village are not obligated to wear the ghunghat when visiting their natal homes in the same village, even after their marriages, and unmarried girls likewise do not adhere to it in their villages (Devi & Kaur, 2019). In the community's view, these girls are all daughters and sisters of the village members, and the expectations of modesty and restraint that apply to

married women do not pertain to them. The ghunghat thus functions as an indicator of marital status and evolving social identity, its practice mediated by daily interactions and intricately rooted in local perceptions of kinship and belonging.

The potential of symbolic interactionism to overemphasize individual agency in the creation of social realities while ignoring the influence of broad structural forces like caste, patriarchy, and economic constraints that are particularly relevant in a rural North Indian society is a significant critique of the theory (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2009; LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). The assumption that social interactions function consistently in different contexts has also led to criticism of interactionist research for being insensitive to cultural diversity.

1.1.3 Family Development Perspective

According to Laszloffy (2002), the family development perspective views families as dynamic entities that progress through several stages, referred to as the "family life cycle," which necessitate adaptation and reorganization within the family unit. In most rural regions, marriage is a near-mandatory social expectation for men and women by a certain age, and remaining unmarried is viewed by families and communities as a threat to reputation and social order (Ahlawat, 2015). Mishra and Kaur (2021) highlight the "marriage squeeze" in rural North India, showing that both "overage" sons and their aging parents face urgent pressure, what they term "multiple biological clocks," to arrange marriages before caregiving responsibilities lapse. In this context, forced bachelorhood carries stigma, generates stress over unfilled domestic and care roles, and jeopardizes intergenerational support in the absence of formal eldercare institutions (Mishra & Kaur, 2021).

The family life cycle often begins with arranged marriages, where parents select spouses for their children to ensure social compatibility and family continuity (Gupta et al., 2021). This transition is frequently commemorated through the practice of dowry, the transfer of wealth or gifts from the bride's family to the groom's family during the marriage, considered a rite of passage for families reaffirming both family ties and a loss (Gupta et al., 2021). Dowry payments have a significant impact on the development of families by influencing the marital and post-marital phases of the family life cycle. The expectation of substantial transfers from the bride's family during the coupling stage results in the reallocation of household resources and the intensification of financial stress. This situation

leads to the parents of daughters increasing their savings and working longer hours to satisfy the dowry demands (Anukriti, Kwon, & Prakash, 2020). This premarital burden frequently persists during the parenting stage, where debts incurred for dowry can undermine investments in health, education, and overall well-being of children. This burden disrupts the smooth progression through developmental tasks of transitioning to married life and then to childbearing (Duvall, 1988). A substantial emphasis is placed on the fulfilment of familial obligations as the contribution to collective household responsibilities, and on the management of complicated friendships with in-laws and the birth of children during the early stages of the family cycle (Gupta et al., 2021). Sons or daughters may establish their own households or relocate as they mature and eventually marry, resulting in a contraction of the family. The transition of authority to the next generation and the aging of parents are the defining characteristics of the final stages.

Despite its utility, the family development perspective is critiqued for privileging nuclear, heterosexual families while overlooking diverse rural structures like single-parent or migration-affected households. Its linear model fails to capture the fluid, complex trajectories shaped by economic hardship, social change, and migration (Laszloffy, 2002).

1.1.4 Conflict Perspective

The conflict perspective views the family as a site of power struggles, not harmony, maintained by dominance rather than consensus (Collins, 1971). It emphasizes that family hierarchies mirror broader political and economic power, with patriarchal norms positioning men as heads of households (Collins, 1971; Kaur, 2012).

Feminist conflict theory highlights how patriarchy privileges men and subordinate women (Osmond & Thorne, 1993; Goldner, 1993). In rural North India, the male head wields decision-making power and transfers authority to his eldest son, perpetuating dominance across generations (Singh, 2010). Women perform most domestic and childcare labor yet face severe constraints on autonomy, education, and participation. Marital choices remain controlled by honor and caste, limiting agency (Caldwell, Reddy, & Caldwell, 1983; Singh, 2010), and their economic contributions seldom translate into any decision-making power (Lahoti et al., 2024). Young, often uneducated brides enter marital homes without any power or status and with suppressed individuality, they are merely treated as unpaid laborers expected to obey (Kandiyoti, 1988; Chowdhry, 1994). The ghunghat, historically reserved for

elites, became a widespread symbol of modesty and family honor, reinforcing gender hierarchies and perpetuating women's subordination in patriarchal societies (Chowdhry, 1994; Chandra, 2007; MacDorman, 1987). Failure to comply with these norms often results in social exclusion (Chowdhry, 1994; Kaur, 2010). The enduring strength of these patriarchal values that prioritize family honor over individual autonomy is underscored by the persistence of practices such as the ghunghat in the face of modernization (MacDorman, 1987).

Caste, first articulated by Manu during the Vedic period, assigns individuals a fixed social position by birth and historically regulated access to resources, production, and landholding (Dhar, 2013; Chhokar, 2007). Today, dominant castes continue to control economic assets, reinforcing inequality in education, healthcare, and political representation, and generating conflicts between privileged and marginalized groups. Originating from occupational specialization, the four *varnas* of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra were conceptualized through a symbolic body metaphor that mapped social hierarchy onto the cosmic being. According to this ancient framework, Brahmins emerged from the mouth, representing their role as priests and keepers of sacred knowledge who spoke divine words and performed rituals. Kshatriyas originated from arms, symbolizing their function as warriors and rulers who provided protection and governance through physical strength. Vaishyas came from the thighs, embodying their position as traders and agriculturalists who supported society's economic foundation. Finally, Shudras were associated with the feet representing laborers who formed the base upon which the entire social structure stood (Raina, 2004). This hierarchical arrangement was justified as necessary for societal vitality with each varna contributing specialized knowledge and skills deemed essential for maintaining cosmic and social order. The Brahmins, the ritually purest of all individuals, stand at the head of this cosmo-social body, while the naturally impure Sudras, or servants, stand at the feet (Harlan & Courtright, 1995). While Shudras are considered impure, the first three varnas are "twice born" (*dwija*) and ritually pure (Srinivas, 1956; Harlan & Courtright, 1995). Purity transmits through blood and is protected by strict endogamy; *anuloma* marriages (higher-caste man with lower-caste woman) yield lower-purity heirs, whereas *pratiloma* unions (higher-caste woman with lower-caste man) produce ostracized offspring (Dhar, 2013). As a consequence, the family's status in the social hierarchy is significantly influenced by the purity of its women. Therefore, the marriage arrangement serves as the

primary context for maintaining the family, lineage, and kin group rank in relation to other castes.

While Gram Panchayats function as constitutionally mandated, democratically elected local governance bodies in rural North India, they coexist with Khap Panchayats, which are unelected traditional councils whose members are selected from dominant community groups and whose authority has been deemed illegal by India's Supreme Court (Taneja, 2018). This parallel existence creates a complex governance landscape where caste and gender dynamics intersect to shape family relations through competing institutional frameworks. Khap Panchayat*s*, predominantly present in the areas composed of the Jat community, have historically operated outside constitutional bounds by resolving local disputes as the self-appointed village courts and maintaining community security through customary law (Chowdhry, 1994). Despite Supreme Court ruling against their legitimacy and legal challenges to their authority, these institutions persist due to their perceived effectiveness, deeply entrenched customs, and the relative weakness of formal governmental structures in rural areas. Operating through self-appointed authority rather than democratic mandate, they systematically exclude women and lower-caste men from decision-making processes while directly challenging the jurisdiction of elected Gram Panchayats, creating an autocratic parallel governance system (Beniwal, 2015). Central to their extra-legal authority is the regulation of marriage practices through strict prohibitions on unions within the same *gotra* (clan), village, or even neighboring villages. These restrictions stem from their clan-based genealogical frameworks and the ideology of *bhaichara,* or brotherhood, which constructs rigid kinship boundaries (Kaur, 2010).

1.1.5 Postmodern Perspective

Postmodernism critiques grand narratives of family life, highlighting diversity, fluidity, and the breakdown of traditional structures under globalization, media, and technological shifts (Giddens, 1992; Uberoi, 2006; Derné, 1994). In rural North India, however, enduring institutions such as the caste-based Khap Panchayats, gotra norms, and patriarchal authority remain deeply rooted even as younger generations encounter destabilizing forces. This coexistence results in a "postmodern contradiction," in which individuals simultaneously fulfil their dutiful familial roles while also exploring identities that are mediated by the digital technology (Sangwan, 2014). Chowdhry (2007) contended that the media and technology, especially television and mobile phones, have become conduits for urban lifestyles and

liberal values, reshaping courtship, desire, and marital aspirations among rural youth. Bollywood narratives and social media platforms offer stories of romantic autonomy that directly compete with local imperatives of izzat, caste endogamy, and family control (Sangwan, 2014). For young women in particular, these digital tools double as instruments of agency and surveillance, enabling premarital relationships while exposing them to familial monitoring aimed at preventing elopements and preserving honor (Sangwan, 2014).

In rural North India, love marriages, the unions formed by personal choice without parental or community arrangement, are widely regarded as deviant and potentially hazardous, posing threats to caste honor and family reputation (Harlan & Courtright, 1995; Mueller, 2008). Young individuals are increasingly expressing personal feelings of love and relationships that challenge traditional and conservative social norms. Expressions of premarital affection are deemed immoral, and romantic choice is considered a direct affront to elder authority and lineage continuity by the Khap Panchayats and villagers (Rathee, 2010; Sangwan, 2010). Coercion, excommunication, forced separation, or violence are used by families to reassert social coherence; in extreme cases, couples face police interventions or resort to suicide due to the community pressure (Ahlawat, 2012; Rathee, 2010). The caste's honor is believed to be contingent upon the chastity of women; any violation of caste-imposed norms through the expression of sexuality results in shame and dishonor for the entire community (Rathee, 2010). The escalating assertion of romantic choice is a profound disruption of community-defined identities and an act of personal autonomy from a postmodernist perspective. Although digital connectivity, media exposure, and education have allowed young people to envision alternative marital arrangements, these aspirations are in direct opposition to the traditional imperatives of *izzat*, caste endogamy, and patriarchal control (Sangwan, 2010; Ahlawat, 2012).

In contrast to the expectations of modernization, the practice of giving dowry has not decreased; rather, it has evolved and been exacerbated in a consumer-driven society (Soy & Sahoo, 2016). Dowry payments continued to increase in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, despite legal prohibitions (Srinivas, 1976, 1984; Rajaraman, 1983; Billig, 1991, 1992; Bhaskar, 2016). Hypergamy induces additional inflation by necessitating larger transfers to secure higher-status matches and indicate upward mobility, while demographic pressures, such as the "marriage squeeze," intensify competition for brides (Caldwell et al., 1983; Srinivasan & Lee, 2004). Dowry continues to serve as a symbolic representation of

family identity, respectability, and competitiveness in hypergamous marriage markets, in addition to its role as a material exchange (Srinivas, 1956; Billig, 1992; Anderson & Bidner, 2015). This blend of tradition and modernity embodies a fragmented social reality in which aspirations for autonomy, honor, and social conformity collide, defining the paradox of postmodern rural North India.

The functionalist and family development perspectives remain important for explaining the durability of joint families and life-cycle rituals. They highlight how families continue to sustain agricultural livelihoods, transmit values, and provide emotional and financial security in rural contexts (Murdock, 1949; Parsons & Bales, 1955; Lamanna & Riedmann, 2009; Duvall, 1988). Lifecycle approaches also capture the pressures associated with dowry and marriage arrangements, particularly where bachelorhood is stigmatized and family honor remains tied to fulfilling generational obligations (Ahlawat, 2015; Mishra & Kaur, 2021; Gupta et al., 2021). However, I do not position myself within these perspectives uncritically. The underlying assumption of the functionalist perspective of harmony obscures the contestations and inequalities that are integral to family life, and therefore I employ it mainly to demonstrate continuity rather than to explain transformation. Similarly, I treat the family development perspective as partial, recognizing that linear stage-based models are ill-equipped to capture the complexities of the evolving nature of families with demographic imbalances and changing aspirations, particularly that of North India. By contrast, symbolic interactionist perspective directs attention to the ways family norms and gendered expectations are enacted in everyday interactions. Practices such as the ghunghat (see Glossary) exemplify how symbols reinforce hierarchy and identity, mediating women's transition into marital homes while simultaneously marking respectability (Chowdhry, 2017; Chaudhry, 2016). These meanings are not abstract but emerge through daily negotiations of kinship and belonging (Mead, 1934; Fiese et al., 2003). This focus on symbolism is important in a context where honor and respectability are continuously negotiated. At the same time, I resist positioning myself fully within this framework, as it risks underemphasizing the structural inequalities of caste and patriarchy that extend beyond the interactional domain.

The conflict perspective, however, problematizes the assumption of familial harmony by foregrounding caste, patriarchy, and the reproduction of inequality (Collins, 1971; Chowdhry, 1994; Kaur, 2010). Within this framework, marriage serves less as a consensual bond than as a mechanism for preserving lineage and social hierarchy, with women's labor, sexuality, and mobility tightly regulated (Kandiyoti, 1988). Informal authorities such as Khap

Panchayats underscore how patriarchal power persists beyond formal legal structures (Beniwal, 2015; Taneja, 2018). The postmodern perspective becomes particularly salient in accounting for the contradictions produced by globalization, media, and technological diffusion. Rural youth encounter competing narratives of love and autonomy through cinema, television, and digital platforms, even as traditional imperatives of izzat and caste endogamy remain forcefully enforced (Giddens, 1992; Uberoi, 2006; Chowdhry, 2007; Sangwan, 2010; Ahlawat, 2012). These tensions create what Sangwan (2014) calls a "postmodern contradiction," in which individuals meet their expected familial duties while also pursuing alternative forms of intimacy and choice.

My own analysis gravitates toward a postmodern stance, which treats choice in marriage not merely as deviance from social norms but as an assertion of agency and a counter-narrative to the dominant logics of caste, patriarchy, and honor (Rathee, 2010). This stance allows for recognition of fragmentation and heterogeneity as defining features of the present moment and acknowledges that even when constrained, individual assertions of autonomy disrupt totalizing accounts of family and marriage in the region.

1.2 Traditional Hindu Marriage Rituals

"For a Hindu marriage to be legally valid under the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, the performance of the essential customary rites and ceremonies, such as *saptapadi* (taking seven steps by the groom and the bride jointly before the sacred fire), must be solemnized, and not just the mere registration of such a marriage."

(Justice B.V. Nagarathna & Justice Augustine George Masih, 2024)

"A happy marriage begins with a ceremony that is uplifting, family-oriented, and harmonious."

(Pandya, 2010).

According to Westermarck (1926), the establishment of marriage in each culture is regulated by customary or legal procedures; without their fulfillment, spouses are not acknowledged as married. As one of the sixteen *samskaras*, or sacraments, Hindu marriages are considered a sacred rite of entrance into family life (Panikkar, 1977; Fruzzetti, 1990; Pandya, 2010). The marriage pole is erected, the thatch roof is constructed, and ritual bathing is performed during the multi-day ceremonies that serve as the primary life-cycle ritual in India, transitioning individuals into adulthood and parenthood (Fruzzetti, 1990; Khandpur, 2017).

Drawing on India's ancient spiritual and cultural corpus, the *Vedas*, the Vedic wedding is conducted beneath a wooden *mandap*, an altar-like canopy (Monger, 2004; Tzeses, 2011; Pandya, 2010). The inclusion of five essential components is necessary for a Vedic marriage ceremony to be considered valid: the *saptapadi* (seven steps around the sacred fire), the formal bestowal of the bride, the ceremonial honoring of the groom by the bestower, the groom taking the bride's hand, and the parental-consent engagement ceremony (Achari, n.d.). In the presence of family, deities, and ancestral spirits, the officiating priest solemnizes the union under the guidance of the *sastras,* or the sacred scriptures. Lord Vishnu and *Agni,* or the fire, serve as primary witnesses (Pandya, 2010; Fruzzetti, 1990).
Hindu marriage is the determinant factor in the distinction between *kutum* (through marriage) and *jnati* (related to blood or descent) classes of relatives, who attend the wedding rituals (Fruzzetti, 1990). The reunion of relatives at a wedding serves to fortify the bonds of existing kinship and to introduce a series of new lines to an ongoing alliance. The *Vāgdānam* engagement is the commencement of the marriage preparations, during which both families publicly commit their support, often through a two-stage tilak and *sagai* (Vatuk, 1972). The agreement is, however, subject to revocation until the wedding. As documented in historical marriage negotiations, parents would stipulate conditions such as "I will marry my daughter at the auspicious time that has been agreed upon, provided that your son remains healthy in body and mind, does not become impotent, commit a crime, or incur debt or vice" (Achari, n.d.). Subsequently, astrologers determine an auspicious *muhurat*, or the auspicious day and time for the couple, by making reference to their horoscopes and the lunar calendar, guaranteeing harmony (Vatuk, 1972).

The formal commencement of the festivities is marked by the *lagan* ceremony at the groom's residence. During this ceremony, the bride's father applies tilak to the groom's forehead, and the dowry, in the form of gold, jewelry, or household items, is publicly displayed as a symbol of social status and security (Vatuk, 1972; Fuller & Narasimhan, 2008; Pardesi, 2002; Sharma, 1981; Uberoi, 1994). Prior to the *lagan*, dowry negotiations are typically finalized with the acquisition of a more desirable match for the bride frequently associated with a substantial dowry (Johnson & Johnson, 2001). The bride's parents also relinquish their rights over their daughter during the dowry transfer (Sharma, 1980; Uberoi, 1994). The dowry details are disclosed to the community by a *Nai,* a barber caste member, and the event is followed by communal feasting, music, and dance (Achari, n.d.). Dowry,

initially intended to serve as premortem inheritance for women and compensation for the groom's family, has since transformed into a symbol of hypergamous ambition and prestige, frequently resulting in substantial financial burdens despite the increasing number of women in the workforce (Sharma, 1980; Boserup, 1970; Nadagouda et al., 1992). The quantity and use of dowries are actively negotiated by women, and daughters also appreciate these gifts for their contribution to the prosperity of the new household (Kumari, 1989; Awasthi, 1996; Prasad, 1994; Mathew, 1987).

The next day, the bride's family members execute *haldi* (turmeric) rites and tie protective amulets. The groom is escorted with the procession of *nikasi*, resting on a mare, to the village temple amidst festive music on the eve of the wedding, typically two days after the *lagan* ceremony. A celebratory procession of the groom's *barat* (invited friends and relatives) arrives at the bride's residence for formal blessings, a communal feast, and reciprocal gift exchanges that solidify the social alliances of both families (Achari, n.d.). Rural North Indian marriages are, in fact, quintessentially communal affairs, bringing together neighbors, relatives, colleagues, and friends in elaborate multi-day celebrations that serve as both a means of social solidarity and a means of status display. From the lagan to the nikasi procession and haldi ceremonies, each participant, whether it be village elders who arrange the mandap or women who apply turmeric paste, fulfills a prescribed role, emphasizing the event's function as a shared cultural performance (Palriwala & Uberoi, 2008). Acts of blessing are combined with tangible economic support as female attendees generally gather to observe the bride's countenance and present monetary gifts (Vatuk, 1975). The wedding venue is transformed into a microcosm of village society and a showcase of familial prestige through lavish food, decorations, and accommodation, with guest lists frequently surpassing a thousand on peak occasions such as the lagan and wedding day itself (Allendorf, 2013). The collective hospitality extends over several days of the event.
Achari (n.d.) outlines the North Indian Hindu wedding as a series of approximately twenty-five ritual acts that are strictly ordered, as delineated in the Pāraskara Sūtra. Dvāra Pūjā welcomes the groom's party with tilak, ārati and Ganesha pūja; Vāra Pūjā honors the groom as an embodiment of Vishnu; Kanyā Āgamana brings the bride forward for mutual garlanding; vāstra dānam and kanyādāna formally transfer her hand with coconut and water offerings; Agni-sthāpana lights the sacred fire; the couple exchanges vows (Pratijñā), performs the main fire sacrifice (Pradhāna Homa), holds hands (Pāṇigrahaṇam), ties the knot (Granthi Bandhanam), offers puffed rice in three rounds of Lājā Homa interspersed with

millstone treading and hymn singing, releases a lock of hair (Veṇī Mocanam), takes seven steps (Saptapadī), receives holy-water sprinkling and sun-invocation blessings, touches hearts (Hṛdaya Sparśam), dons the māṅgalyadhāraṇam or rings, receives vermilion (Sindūra Dānam) and final blessings (Āśīrvādam), presents the priests' honorarium (Ācārya Sambhāvanam), and concludes with mandap dismantling and the couple's departure (Maṇḍapa Udvāsanam & Prasthānam) (Achari, n.d.). The ritual's seamless repetition, as Bourdieu (1977) posits, functions as a "doxa," a sequence that is assumed to be natural and reproduces caste, gender, and kinship hierarchies by making each rite an unquestionable prerequisite for a legitimate marriage.

MacDorman (1987) extensively documented the ceremonial distinctions that establish a clear status hierarchy between bride-givers and bride-takers during marriage ceremonies. Regardless of the families' actual social standing, the bride's family consistently demonstrates elaborate hospitality and ritual deference toward the groom's party. This deference manifests in various ways: the bride-giving family's anxious efforts to exceed all expectations, their diligent care for the groom's entourage, and symbolic gestures of subordination such as the bride's father touching the groom's feet (MacDorman, 1987). Parry (1979) and Vatuk (1975) situate this system within hierarchically ranked patrilineal groups, observing that bride-givers are invariably positioned below bride-takers in social status, arguing that marriage functions as a hypergamous exchange wherein families of inferior status offer their daughters to those of superior rank, while intra-clan marriages remain strictly prohibited. These elaborate ceremonies serve a dual purpose: they integrate the two families through newly established kinship connections while simultaneously reinforcing existing social rankings. Through rituals such as gift exchanges and shared pujas, the families create permanent affiliations that extend beyond blood relations (Fruzzetti, 1990). As Pandya (2010) observes, despite evolving forms, these rites retain their fundamental significance because they primarily foster social, emotional, and spiritual development within both the families and individuals they unite.

1.3 Made in Heaven: Exploring the Marriage Market and Ideal Matches

"Upon entering a marriage arrangement, it is with the understanding that you will remain together for the entirety of your lives, regardless of circumstances. One should not underestimate the situation, assuming, "If this fails, we can simply divorce and attempt again.""

(Achari, n.d.)

In contemporary India, the majority of the middle-class view marriage as an arranged, heterosexual, and lifelong commitment where chance plays no role. Arranged marriages are understood as unions between not only two individuals but also their entire families (Desai & Andrist, 2010). In these arrangements, families or guardians orchestrate and consent to the union with minimal input from the prospective bride and groom themselves (MacDorman, 1987). While the father typically assumes primary responsibility for marriage decisions, the process involves extensive consultation with friends and relatives. According to the Indian Human Development Survey (IHDS) of 2005, parents selected spouses in over 90% of marriages between 1960 and 2005 (Desai et al., 2018). In joint families, the family head, often the paternal grandfather or eldest son, may assume this responsibility (MacDorman, 1987). It is hypothesized that the risks associated with marriage can only be accurately assessed by parents who have had significant life experiences according to the inter-family conventions. The culture reinforces confidence in arranged marriages by emphasizing profound trust and respect for parental authority (Gupta, 1974). Community endorsement, particularly from same-caste members, carries considerable weight due to their potential influence on family reputation. These community members can either support or undermine potential matches by disseminating information about the opposing party (Gupta, 1974).

1.3.1 Caste and Kinship Regulations

Despite expectations that modernization would reduce caste boundaries in urban and metropolitan areas, inter-caste marriage rates remain low, and arranged marriages continue to predominate (Ray, Chaudhuri, & Sahai, 2020). Partner selection operates within strict parameters defined by caste, *jati,* or the sub-caste, and geographical proximity. Intra-village or lineage marriages face frequent restrictions to prevent intra-group conflict and maintain exogamous customs (MacDorman, 1987). The rule of gotra exogamy holds particular significance and complements caste endogamy. The well-established “four-gotra rule” forbids marriage within an individual’s own gotra as well as within the gotras of their mother, paternal grandmother, and maternal grandmother (Karve, 1953). Combined with village exogamy and additional kinship-based restrictions, this exogamous system narrows the pool of potential partners while facilitating marriage alliances that expand social networks and establish new connections among various lineages and villages (Karve, 1953; Chowdhry, 1994). It often leaves families unaware of suitable marriage partners, requiring them to rely

on extended social networks for connections (Gupta, 1974). Post-marriage, over 90% of couples reside with the husband's family (Desai et al., 2018). While brides must relocate beyond their natal village, they typically do not travel far, as 78.3% of marriages occur within the same district or within the radius of 50 kilometers (Ray, Chaudhuri, & Sahai, 2020; Rukmini, 2014), with an average travel time of three hours from the bride's household to the groom's household (Desai et al., 2018).

This intersection of caste and kinship profoundly shapes marriage practices, with arranged marriages serving as crucial mechanisms for maintaining social boundaries and hierarchies (MacDorman, 1987; Dumont, 1970). Caste-endogamous marriages, while creating structured marriage markets, prove essential to social organization by preserving caste purity, individual social status, and group identity across generations (Dumont, 1970; Ray, Chaudhuri, & Sahai, 2020; Srivastava & Willoughby, 2023). Banerjee et al. (2013) demonstrate that the preference for intra-caste marriage is so pronounced that families frequently prioritize caste compatibility over education or economic status. This endogamous persistence stems from desires to preserve social capital, inheritance patterns, and established community support networks, alongside cultural and ritual imperatives (Dugar et al., 2012; Banerjee et al., 2013). Kinship and marriage regulations mirror and reinforce the overarching framework of social stratification, playing critical roles in perpetuating caste-based hierarchies and internal distinctions (MacDorman, 1987; Dumont, 1970). Dumont (1970) rightly observes that the relationship between caste and kinship is particularly intimate, with internal hierarchies visible within sub-castes due to differences in lineage, territory, and ritual status. Marriage alliances are meticulously arranged to preserve both family honor and hierarchical status within the broader caste system, thereby sustaining caste endogamy and facilitating internal community hierarchization (Dumont, 1970; Banerjee et al., 2013).

1.3.2 Spouse Selection Criteria and Compatibility Assessment

Before formally declaring marriages among their children, parents and trusted advisors conduct extensive investigations to ensure compatibility, future prosperity, and divine satisfaction. The concept of *sanjog*, or a predestined marriage, frequently emerges in these discussions, serving the dual purpose of legitimizing matches while mitigating rejection of unsuitable partners (MacDorman, 1987). Compatibility assessment examines multiple factors including age, economic and social status, education and occupation, physical attractiveness, and astrological considerations (Goli et al., 2013).

For prospective grooms, the most valued characteristics include social and economic status, family reputation and respectability, dowry demands, marriage costs to the bride's family, health and earning potential, and, to a lesser extent, skin color and physical attractiveness (Goli et al., 2013). While education is often perceived as advantageous for social advancement, it remains secondary among lower-caste populations, though middle- and upper-class families regard education alongside socioeconomic status, age, and values as primary considerations. The competitive marriage market intensifies competition among brides' families, resulting in increased dowry payments. People particularly prize grooms who possess cultivable land, higher education, and government positions as symbols of long-term economic security and social status (Ray, Chaudhuri, & Sahai, 2020). Rao (1993) demonstrates that dowry amounts increase significantly with each additional acre of land owned by the groom's family, making such matches highly sought after despite premium costs. Geographic considerations also influence marriage decisions. Despite a groom's desirable qualities, parents may hesitate to marry daughters into regions lacking basic amenities or experiencing harsh climatic conditions. Chowdhury (1999) found that environmental and regional factors significantly influence both dowry negotiations and marriage decisions, as parents consider their daughters' overall well-being and comfort when selecting partners. Astrological compatibility may further constitute the most critical factor in determining appropriate matches. Marriage arrangements frequently terminate if prospective spouses' horoscopes do not align (Gupta, 1974). Horoscope analysis, conducted by community astrologers or numerologists and sometimes lasting days, generates match percentages that increase with astrological attribute similarities, theoretically predicting marriage success (Gupta, 1974). However, families vary in the significance they assign to horoscopic matching, as some terminate otherwise ideal matches due to unfavorable astrological pairings.

Many families consider joint family residence a significant indicator of harmony and cooperation, generally preferring to arrange daughters' marriages into extended family groups (Gupta, 1974). The selection process for daughters' marriages receives significantly more attention and consideration than that for sons' marriages (MacDorman, 1987). This asymmetry relates to young brides' low status and restricted roles within the prevailing patrilocal marriage. After marriage, they relocate to their husbands' residences, where they exercise minimal influence over family operations and face vulnerability and isolation (Edlund, 1999). They must demonstrate exceptional diligence, obedience, and compliance

while suppressing distinctive personality aspects to avoid offending mothers-in-law. The transition responsibility rests entirely with them, who understand that their husbands' families will make no accommodating efforts (Chaudhry, 2016, 2019). Within marital households, their primary roles fundamentally involve serving as subordinate laborers and aides to mothers-in-law (Edlund, 1999). Consequently, boys' parents prioritize youth and amiability over individual personality characteristics that might prove more important in egalitarian spouse selection contexts.

According to Goli et al. (2013), the most desirable bride qualities include chastity, diligence, obedience, health, fair skin, and absence of defects. Skin color represents a frequently observed physical characteristic in female selection (Jaynkar, 1994), with lighter or fairer skin tones increasing preference levels while dark skin is considered indicative of weakness and defects. Additionally, prospective brides must possess necessary household management skills and originate from respectable families. Many believe early marriages protect female chastity, facilitate girls' transitions from paternal to marital domains, and ease adjustment to husbands and in-laws (Goli et al., 2013). Parental protection concerns intensify due to rising domestic violence from both in-laws and husbands, increasing dowry demands and related deaths, and educated girls' difficulties finding equally qualified partners (Dang, Kulkarni, & Gaiha, 2018). Despite university-educated men's frequent preferences for educated brides, most families do not prioritize daughters' education. While educated women increasingly represent valuable assets in modern marriages, historically valued women were those capable of household management (Lee & Stanley, 2000). Some families favor less educated girls, believing they will prove more submissive and less likely to challenge authority (Lee & Stanley, 2000).

Anticipated costs, particularly the dowry, significantly influence marriage arrangements and have become a central transaction that reflects imbalances between bride-givers and bride-takers. Demanded quantities often determine both match feasibility and stability, as families offer substantial gifts to ensure not only alliance formation but also lifelong hospitality and favorable bride treatment within marital households (Dyson & Moore, 1983, p. 44). This practice functions as ongoing insurance against neglect, compelling husbands' families to uphold social obligations and honor brides' positions within their kinship groups (Marriott, 1955, p. 112). Thus, dowry operates as both a symbolic and material mechanism reinforcing economic and social hierarchies central to arranged

marriages. Geographic separation between brides' natal and marital homes further entrenches social hierarchies and facilitates integration into husbands' families. Families frequently prefer partners from distant villages, believing this choice masks initial adjustment difficulties and preserves brides' subordinate status by minimizing immediate familial oversight (Jeffery & Jeffery, 1984). This deliberate exogamy creates clear boundaries of status and loyalty, embedding marital unions within broader intervillage alliance networks while reinforcing patriarchal norms prioritizing obedience and service over personal autonomy (Jeffery & Jeffery, 1984). Concerns about premarital intimacy and pregnancy create considerable social pressure for early marriages, as unsupervised interactions with boys are feared to tarnish family honor and jeopardize future alliances. Western-style courtship faces general prohibition, and any inappropriate behavior, including spending time alone with men or engaging in premarital sex, can result in social ostracism, financial ruin, and diminished marriage prospects for both daughters and siblings (Lee & Stanley, 2000; Caldwell, 2005). Consequently, families vigilantly monitor daughters' behavior, prioritizing protective measures that reinforce early marriages as a means to avert scandal and maintain communal reputation (Caldwell, 2005).

Critics argue that the mainstream scholarship often mischaracterizes arranged marriages through Western-centric lenses that overemphasize individual autonomy, egalitarianism, and coercive elder authority (Tahir, 2021). Such analyses overlook the communal ethos underpinning arranged unions, including values of mutual aid, familial duty, and collective harmony essential to marriage processes (Tahir, 2021). In collectivist societies, social behavior operates through norms, obligations, and interdependence, with individuals subordinating personal desires to uphold family cohesion and honor (Triandis, 1995). Recognizing these dynamics challenges assumptions that arranged marriages lack genuine affection or autonomy, instead highlighting their embeddedness within kinship networks that sustain social stability and reciprocal support.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have established the foundational context necessary for understanding traditional marriage practices in rural North India, documenting how village institutions, caste regulations, kinship rules, and elaborate ritual sequences create a highly structured system where marriages must conform to strict endogamous and exogamous principles to gain social legitimacy. This descriptive analysis reveals that successful marriages in this

context depend not only on following complex kinship rules but also on extensive community participation and ritual validation that integrate unions into existing social networks. Having mapped these normative expectations and institutional requirements, I can now examine how CRMs emerge as responses to demographic pressures while simultaneously violating these established principles, creating new forms of marital relationships that remain socially precarious due to their departure from traditional legitimation mechanisms. I do so extensively in the following chapter.

Chapter 2: After the Marriage Squeeze: Growing Up in CRMFs across North India and East Asia

Demographic imbalances have fundamentally altered marriage patterns across Asia, creating new forms of family structures that challenge traditional social boundaries. When decades of son preference and sex-selective practices produce severe gender imbalances, societies develop various responses to address acute bride shortages. These responses typically involve marriages that cross traditional boundaries of region, nation, culture, and class, connecting economically disadvantaged women from distant areas with men unable to find local partners. This chapter provides a systematic comparative analysis of different forms of marriage migration across multiple contexts, examining how demographic pressures have generated similar solutions in diverse cultural and political settings. It begins by documenting North India's demographic crisis, where states like Haryana and Punjab exhibit some of the world's most skewed sex ratios. This analysis traces how these imbalances have forced men to seek brides from economically disadvantaged eastern states, disrupting traditional patterns of caste endogamy and geographical proximity in marriage arrangements. The emergence of long-distance CRMs represents a dramatic departure from historical matrimonial norms, creating unions that span over 1000 kilometers and cross boundaries of language, culture, and social hierarchy. The third section then expands to examine analogous phenomena across East Asia, where comparable demographic pressures have produced similar patterns of marriage migration. From China's internal migration between provinces to cross-border unions linking Chinese men with Vietnamese women, from Taiwan's Southeast Asian bride phenomenon to Korea and Japan's multicultural marriage policies, these cases reveal how different states manage demographic challenges through varying approaches to marriage migration. The final section situates these contemporary Asian patterns within the broader historical context of commercialized marriage migration, tracing the evolution from colonial-era "picture brides" to modern internet-mediated mail-order bride systems. This historical perspective illuminates how technological changes and global economic inequalities have transformed but not eliminated the fundamental dynamics driving long-distance marriage arrangements. It examines European contexts where marriage migration operates under different regulatory frameworks, from Germany's Turkish and Moroccan transnational marriages to Poland's Ukrainian and Vietnamese unions. These cases demonstrate how varying state policies regarding family reunification, citizenship, and integration create different experiences for migrant families.

Throughout this comparative analysis, the chapter pays particular attention to clarifying the terminology used to describe these marriages. Terms like CRMs, CBMs, international marriages, transnational marriages, intercultural marriages, and mail-order bride arrangements each emphasize different aspects of these phenomena and carry distinct analytical implications. Understanding these terminological distinctions is crucial for developing precise analytical frameworks. The chapter consistently highlights how children born into these unions face similar challenges across all contexts, despite significant differences in cultural settings and state policies. These children must navigate questions of identity, belonging, and social positioning that existing research has inadequately addressed. As this generation reaches adulthood, their marriageability and sense of self have emerged as critical indicators of social acceptance and successful integration across North Indian and East Asian contexts primarily. The existing literature points toward concerning patterns through multiple indicators: educational attainment gaps where children from CBMFs consistently lag behind peers in academic performance; psychological well-being lapses including higher rates of depression, identity conflicts, and social withdrawal; systematic social exclusion from peer networks, community activities, and marriage markets; and restricted access to economic opportunities and social mobility pathways. In North India, research documents how children face stigma, and name-calling among other prejudices, while East Asian studies reveal similar patterns of stigmatization affecting their self-esteem and future prospects. These convergent findings across diverse contexts suggest that marriageability serves as a crucial lens for understanding how social boundaries operate and whether demographic pressures genuinely transform hierarchical systems or merely create temporary accommodation going forward. The chapter identifies this second generation as a critical population for understanding the long-term consequences of demographic change and marriage migration, particularly as their transition to adulthood reveals the extent to which societies have truly accepted or continue to marginalize these families.

2.1 North India's Demographic Crisis: Son Preference and the Marriage Squeeze

The sex ratio, defined as the number of females per 1000 males within a given population, has consistently been low in the region of North India (Table 2).

Table 2

History of Sex Ratio in India

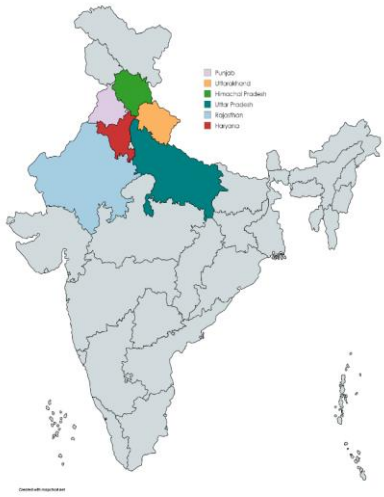
History of Sex Ratio in India												
	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
India	972	964	955	950	945	946	941	930	934	927	933	940
State-Wise Data (North India)												
Punjab	832	780	799	815	836	844	854	865	879	882	876	895
Haryana	867	835	844	852	869	871	868	867	870	865	861	879
Rajasthan	905	908	896	907	906	921	908	911	919	910	922	928
Uttar Pradesh	938	915	908	903	907	995	907	876	882	876	898	912
Himachal Pradesh	884	890	890	890	890	890	890	890	890	890	970	972
Uttarakhand	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	964	963

Note: Sex ratio data derived from the Census of India, 2011.

This table reveals a persistent and worsening gender imbalance in India's sex ratio over the past century, with North Indian states showing particularly severe patterns. India's national sex ratio declined from 972 females per 1000 males in 1901 to a new low of 927 in 1991, recovering only marginally to 940 by 2011. Punjab and Haryana in the north exhibit the most dramatic imbalances, with Punjab hitting 780 in 1911 and both states remaining well below 900 even in 2011 (895 and 879, respectively). These figures are significantly worse than the national average and reflect demographic distortions that directly contribute to marriage market pressures exacerbating the issue of a "marriage squeeze" (Bhat, 2002), an essential issue for examining the dynamics and consequences of the low sex-ratio phenomenon. In this region (Figure 1), families significantly prefer sons over daughters (George & Dahiya, 1998), as further indicated by the child sex ratio (0-6 Y) data history of the state of Haryana in particular (Table 3).

Figure 1

The region of North India



Note. Created using MapMyChart (https://www.mapchart.net/india.html).

Table 3

Child Sex Ratio Data Comparison between India and Haryana

Child Sex Ratio (0-6 Y)						
	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
India	976	964	962	945	927	918
Haryana	910	898	902	879	819	830

Note: Child sex ratio data derived from the Census of India, 2011.

The child sex ratio data shows a dramatic worsening of gender imbalance among the youngest population, with India declining from 976 girls per 1000 boys in 1961 to a new low of 918 in 2011. Haryana's child sex ratio pattern is particularly severe, dropping from 910 to just 830 by 2011. A variety of factors have contributed to this well-documented enduring disparity in data. The extent of son preference and the subordinate status of female children are significantly influenced by a patriarchal economic framework, prevailing cultural norms (including religious and caste-based institutional standards), and the perceived economic advantages of males over females (Dyson and Moore, 1983; Miller, 1985, 2001; Das Gupta, 1987; Kishor, 1993; Behrman, 1998; Arokiasamy, 2007; Sekher & Hatti, 2010). In patrilineal and patrilocal societies, sons are regarded as the primary providers for their parents, both prior to and subsequent to marriage (Das Gupta, 2000). Daughters relocate to their husbands'

families and provide their biological parents with comparatively minimal economic or emotional support (Bhasin, 1993; Geeta, 2007). Das Gupta (2000) argues that daughters are considered net-liabilities, which underlies India's clear son preference from birth (Sonawat, 2001). Sons are prized for providing old-age support, while daughters bring child-rearing and dowry expenses with little familial gain (Bhopal, 1997). Consequently, women become property first of their fathers, then their husbands, and, if widowed, of their sons (Jayakar, 1994; Sonawat, 2001). Historically, practices like *sati*, where a widow self-immolated on her husband's pyre, were praised as the ultimate demonstration of wifely devotion (Harlan & Courtright, 1995). The son preference is entrenched in cultural norms and reinforced by economic and social frameworks, driving practices like sex-selective abortions and female infanticide, skewing sex ratios at birth (Panigrahi, 1972; Brown, 1857). Colonial reports documented caste-based infanticide among the landholding communities of the Rajputs, Jats, Ahirs, Gurjars, Khatris, and some Brahmins in northern and western India, where daughters were deemed burdensome (Steed, 1955; Pocock, 1971; Clark, 1983; Vishwanath, 2000). These traditions have perpetuated a persistent female shortfall in regions like Punjab, Haryana, and Gujarat, where cultural conventions continue to shape family-building practices (Altekar, 1962).

The 1871 British census inaugurated systematic measurement of India's sex ratios, setting benchmarks for the demographic studies. By the 1960s, scholars had extensively mined these census data at regional and national levels to identify the drivers of sex-ratio imbalances. Their work established the empirical foundation for later economic, sociological, and anthropological analyses. Economic literature frames daughter neglect as a rational cost-benefit calculation: the high costs of rearing and marrying girls outweigh the anticipated old-age support sons provide (Espenshade, 1977; Folbre, 1984). Parents' prioritization of sons emerges from weighing dowry burdens against the economic returns of male labor, with potential marital discord fueling further bias (Williamson, 1978; Bose & Scott, 2003). Scholars also explore how household strategies conceal intra-familial power struggles and resistance to gender hierarchies (Basu, 1992; Wolf, 1990). Economic rationales further entrench son preference: a son's income supports his parents and sisters without post-marital obligations, while a daughter requires a dowry and yields no financial returns to her family of origin (Das Gupta et al., 2003). Parents invest in multiple sons to diversify economic risk, such as sending one to urban employment. Rising prosperity and the availability of prenatal

diagnostic technologies have intensified the trend toward smaller, son-centric nuclear families.

Sociologists and anthropologists have situated son preference within broader frameworks of patriarchy and development. Analyses invoke the concept of patriarchal bargaining to explain women's positionality (Kandiyoti, 1991; Lerner, 1986), women's development issues (Boserup, 1970; Tinker, 1990; Kabeer, 1994), and female autonomy versus seclusion (Mandelbaum, 1988). Studies on women's labor in the household and community (Croll, 2000) and on fertility patterns, including infanticide (Patel, 1994), further deepen our understanding of sex-based valuation. Recent work correlates rising female literacy and wealth with evolving patterns of prenatal sex selection and discrimination (Bose, 2001). Monica Das Gupta's sociological analysis emphasizes that patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence disincentivize investing in daughters, who marry out and confer no enduring benefits on their natal families (Das Gupta, 1987). The proverb "ek ladki toh paraya dhan hai" ("a daughter is another's wealth") encapsulates the belief that children become someone else's responsibility after marriage. Sons, by contrast, perform funeral rites, safeguard family honor, and provide ritual and economic support, reinforcing lifelong pressure on women to produce male heirs.

Visaria's historical analysis debunked myths of random variation, attributing skewed sex ratios to elevated female mortality rather than enumeration errors (Visaria, 1971). Miller's (1981) seminal study, *The Endangered Sex*, provided a conceptual framework linking inheritance rules, old-age support, religious obligations, and dowry costs to son preference (Miller, 1981). She documented regional differences, higher neglect in the north than the south, and highlighted how agricultural production systems shape the cultural valuation of female labor. Oldenburg (2003) later challenged Miller's findings for Punjab and Haryana, noting women's central roles in farming despite skewed ratios, while Palriwala (1991) illuminated the "invisible" labor women perform in both natal and marital households (Oldenburg, 2003; Palriwala, 1991). Demographic research on landownership has reaffirmed Miller's insights: larger landholdings correlate with more male-biased child sex ratios (Arokiasamy & Goli, 2012). In mechanized, wheat-producing zones of northern and northwestern India, sex ratios at birth are highly skewed, diminishing the value of female agricultural labor. In contrast, rice-cultivating southern and eastern states, which rely on female labor, exhibit more balanced gender ratios. Post-1991 analyses of caste- and region-

specific data have underscored a persistent north-south divide (Mitra, 2001; Mayer, 1999). Mitra traced the widening gender gap since 1901 and highlighted intrastate, inter-district, and even inter-village variations (Mitra, 2001:154–155). Mayer and Mitra argue that socio-cultural norms and technological adoption, not merely biology or reporting errors, drive these distortions. P.N. Mari Bhat's (2002) work on long-term declines in female numbers suggests contemporary sex-selective abortion is a technological extension of historic daughter neglect (Bhat, 2002). He notes a rise in prenatal selection after the 1990s, fueled by affordable ultrasound, compounding excess female mortality from early childhood neglect. Agnihotri's analysis of 2001 census data attributes urban low sex ratios primarily to sex-selective abortion, which surged in the 1980s and 1990s (Agnihotri, 2003). He documents enduring rural–urban gaps in sex ratios from 1901 to 2011, with Haryana's urban areas persistently lagging despite modest decadal improvements. Ashish Bose further shows that increasing female literacy and prosperity coexist with rising feticide, coining the term "DEMARU states" (daughters' eradication) for Punjab, Haryana, and Gujarat (Bose, 2001). In Punjab, Delhi, and Maharashtra, girls and higher-order boys are aborted when firstborns are sons; in Haryana, son preference persists even at high birth orders (Retherford et al., 2003). George and Dahiya (1998) observed that families bear children until they secure enough sons, and districts like Mahendragarh saw child sex ratios plummet from 892 in 1991 to 784 in 2011 (George & Dahiya, 1998; Chowdhry, 1994). These localized trends point out the need for region-specific policies to counter both pre-natal and post-natal gender biases.

Maharashtra led the way in 1988 with the Maharashtra Regulation of Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques Act to curb sex-selective practices. Building on this, the Government of India enacted the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act (PCPNDT) in 1994 (effective 1996), which expanded the 1991 PNDT Act. It specifically targeted the misuse of ultrasound for sex determination amid a longstanding cultural preference for sons (Sudha & Rajan, 1999). Grassroot activists and women's groups drove these legal reforms. NGOs such as CEHAT and AIDWA highlighted the abuse of diagnostic technology and filed public interest litigations, most notably in 2000 by CEHAT, MASUM, and Dr. Sabu George, leading to the 2003 amendment that encompassed pre-conception techniques and strengthened enforcement (John, 2008). The PC-PNDT Act established a threefold framework: permitting pre-natal diagnostics only for specified medical reasons, banning pre-conception sex-selection techniques, and outlawing disclosure of fetal sex. All centers had to register; authorities could inspect, seal equipment, and prosecute

violators (Bhaktwani, 2012). The Indian Medical Association has called for evaluations, noting that an estimated 200,000 women remain "missing" annually due to prenatal sex selection, despite these safeguards, and medical practitioners argue that stringent provisions impede legitimate care (Kalyanikar, 2024).

Recognizing that legislation alone was insufficient, the government launched the *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (BBBP) program on January 22, 2015, from Haryana. The program set three core objectives: preventing sex-selective elimination, ensuring girls' survival and protection, and promoting their education and empowerment (Government of India, 2015). It implemented community awareness campaigns, inter-departmental coordination, and measurable targets for child mortality, nutrition, school enrolment, sanitation, legal protections, and a ≥10-point rise in the sex ratio at birth (Government of India, 2015). Critics note that of the ₹684 crore allocated through 2019, 56% went to publicity while only ₹159 crore funded field interventions, and no independent impact assessment has been conducted (Chandra, 2021). By 2021, 53 of 161 program districts saw declines in child sex ratio, underscoring uneven outcomes. However, Haryana, the first state to pilot the program, saw an increase in the child sex ratio from 836 (NFHS-4, 2015–16) to 893 (NFHS-5, 2020–21), and from 871 to 922 in Civil Registration System data (2014–2020), with analysis suggesting that the program contributed to an annual increase of 7.4 points in the sex ratio at birth (The Times of India, 2021). Haryana also innovated locally, incentivizing informants (₹100,000 reward) to report sex-determination clinics and launching the "Ladli" and "Aapki Beti Hamari Beti" schemes. High-profile successes by women athletes have further shifted perceptions of girls' value (Kissu, 2023). Still, the postponed 2021 census due to COVID-19 limits demographic clarity, and experts urge reallocating funds toward antenatal care and addressing systemic bias in healthcare. The broader social fallout, from increased violence to spousal shortages, illustrates the urgency of coupling legal reform with targeted, grassroots interventions (Hudson & Boer, 2004; Kaur, 2004).

Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (1995) famoulsy introduced the concept of "missing girls" to quantify millions of excess female deaths stemming from intra-household discrimination in nutrition, healthcare, and education (Drèze & Sen, 1995, pp. 140–144). They showed that most female mortality occurs post-infancy, challenging the idea that infanticide alone drives skewed ratios. Their analysis also revealed caste differentials, noting that Scheduled Castes (SCs) often exhibit slightly more egalitarian sex ratios where women's

labor is valued (Drèze & Sen, 1995, pp. 155–157). A marriage squeeze emerges when demographic imbalances leave fewer eligible women for a growing cohort of men, magnified by the societal expectation that husbands marry younger brides (Williamson, 1978; Bose & Scott, 2003). As the pool of marriageable women shrinks, older men face increasing difficulty finding partners, intensifying pressures on families to secure sons who will maintain lineage and property. This squeeze not only affects individual marital prospects but also alters broader social stability.

2.2 Emergence of Long-Distance CRMs in Rural North India

The demographic crisis created by decades of declining sex ratios has fundamentally transformed marriage practices in rural North India, particularly in Haryana, where CRMs have emerged as a response to acute bride shortages. Haryana, with one of India's lowest female-to-male sex ratios, has witnessed substantial numbers of men acquiring poor women as brides from primarily eastern regions, including West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Jharkhand, Odisha, and other states (Mukherjee, 2013; Kaur, 2004, 2008). These marriages represent a dramatic departure from traditional matrimonial norms, crossing boundaries of caste, language, region, and geographic distance that can exceed 1000 kilometers (Chaudhry & Mohan, 2011). The phenomenon has evolved from isolated cases in the 1990s to a systematic pattern affecting thousands of families across North India, fundamentally altering rural marriage markets and kinship structures. Kaur's (2004) pioneering research first documented how declining sex ratios due to decades of discrimination against women have resulted in bringing women from poorer states, establishing the demographic foundation for understanding this phenomenon. Her subsequent work (Kaur, 2008, 2010, 2013) revealed how the crisis extends beyond simple numerical imbalances to encompass complex social hierarchies where certain categories of men become effectively unmarriageable within local contexts. The research demonstrates that by the mid-1990s, many bachelor men were being rejected on grounds of landlessness, lack of education, advanced age, or poor reputation, conditions that coincided with an overall shortage of local brides (Kaur, 2004). This dual crisis of demographic scarcity and social selectivity created conditions where cross-regional solutions became not merely acceptable but necessary for family continuity and male social adulthood.

The scholarly literature reveals intricate motivations driving these alliances that operate simultaneously on both sending and receiving sides, reflecting broader patterns of

regional inequality and gendered vulnerability. From the perspective of Haryana grooms, the principal driver remains the acute shortage of local brides combined with their inability to meet local marriage market requirements (Kaur, 2008). Chaudhry's (2016, 2019a, 2019b) longitudinal ethnographic studies in Uttar Pradesh demonstrated that men seeking CRBs often face multiple intersecting disadvantages, including landlessness, limited education, ages beyond typical groom categories, previous marital failures, or reputational damage that render them unmarriageable within local marriage markets. However, these same men often possess certain advantages attractive to distant families: steady employment as farmers, laborers, or military personnel, and the crucial ability to offer dowry-free matches that eliminate crushing financial burdens for bride families. The offer of no dowry combined with coverage of all wedding expenses has become a major selling point that transforms economic disadvantages in local markets into competitive advantages in cross-regional contexts (Kaur, 2010). From the women's perspective, the dynamics prove equally complex and economically driven, revealing how poverty intersects with patriarchal marriage norms to create constrained choices. Mukherjee's (2013, 2015) ethnographic work in Haryana and West Bengal highlighted how extreme poverty and inability to meet exorbitant dowry demands in sending regions intersected with bride shortages in receiving areas that affect both regions through different mechanisms. Kaur's (2010) earlier research among Bengali brides identified poverty and dowry pressure as the two primary factors pushing these eastern women into CRMs, while her broader comparative work reveals how different sending regions face varying economic pressures and marriage market constraints. Ahlawat's (2009, 2015) research emphasized how adverse sex ratios combine with poverty, unemployment, and social problems like addiction to create conditions where CRMs become the only viable option for ensuring daughters marry at appropriate ages, a paramount concern for family honor in rural contexts.

The matchmaking infrastructure supporting these marriages has evolved into sophisticated networks that blur boundaries between legitimate arrangements and commodified transactions. Kukreja and Kumar's (2013) comprehensive research across 226 villages in receiving regions of Haryana and Rajasthan revealed how these marriages operated through complex networks involving brokers, family members, religious organizations, and intermediary chains who facilitated matches by emphasizing "dowry-free, all-expenses-paid" arrangements. These networks often involved married migrant women functioning as crucial links, bringing in their sisters, neighbors, or acquaintances by

promoting the prospect of escaping poverty through marriage, effectively creating chains of cross-regional alliances that span multiple generations (Kaur, 2012; Kukreja, 2017). The matchmaking process typically began with intermediaries in sending villages who identify poor families with marriageable daughters and approach them with proposals that stress economic relief and social mobility rather than romantic compatibility or cultural affinity (Mishra, 2013, 2017). The broker networks revealed considerable diversity in organizational structure and motivation, ranging from altruistic family connections to explicitly commercial enterprises. Some arrangements involved religious organizations, particularly among Muslim communities where *Jamaats* facilitate matches based on shared religious identity despite regional differences (Kukreja, 2024). Even husbands of CRBs sometimes become brokers for new grooms, charging flat rates to arrange matches and blurring the line between matchmaking and commodification (Kukreja, 2018b). The research revealed that desperate bachelors seek wives through these varied brokers just as much as poverty-stricken parents of marriageable daughters approach these brokers to arrange beneficial alliances, suggesting mutual rather than unidirectional exploitation (Kukreja, 2021). The transactional nature of dowry and the centrality of cash and other assets in firming up marriage alliances proves particularly significant among Dalits and Muslims, two groups from which a substantial majority of CRBs originate, where excessive dowry demands offer dispossessed males and their families forms of economic security they otherwise lack (Kukreja, 2024).

The emergence of CRMs has generated significant resistance from local institutions and community structures, reflecting deeper anxieties about cultural purity, social order, and the maintenance of traditional hierarchies. Khap Panchayats, that strictly enforce endogamy rules, typically view these alliances as fundamentally disruptive to community honor and established social hierarchies (Chowdhry, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2007). These councils, which wield considerable informal authority over marriage practices, publicly condemn CRMs as threats to caste purity and cultural integrity, with caste elders describing them as ‘bad for our honor’ and expressing concerns about the dilution of local customs and the introduction of the so-called foreign influences (Mishra, 2013). Research documents how Khap leaders often prefer to maintain the fiction that these marriages do not occur in their jurisdictions rather than addressing the underlying demographic crisis that necessitates them, creating official denial that coexists with practical acceptance (Ahlawat, 2015; Kukreja, 2017). Gram Panchayats, the constitutionally mandated local self-governments that theoretically represent democratic governance at the village level, often fail to provide adequate support for

integration of CRBs and instead reflect prevailing community biases that marginalize these women and their children (Ankit, 2023). The institutional response reveals what Chowdhry (2005) describes as a "crisis of masculinity," where traditional patriarchal structures struggle to accommodate changing demographic realities while maintaining existing power hierarchies and gender norms. This crisis manifests in contradictory responses where the same institutions that depend on CRMs and "masculinity" and the bachelor problem simultaneously stigmatize these unions and their participants to preserve ideological commitments to endogamy and cultural purity.

Media portrayals have consistently framed these marriages through sensationalized narratives of trafficking and exploitation, creating what Mishra (2017) describes as "moral panic" that casts rural brides and their husbands as "social folk devils" without acknowledging the nuanced realities of constrained choice and economic desperation. Journalistic accounts typically emphasize the most dramatic cases of abuse, deception, and cultural conflict while ignoring successful adaptations and the genuine relief these marriages provide to economically desperate families (Kissu, 2023). NGO reports similarly focus on rescue and repatriation efforts rather than addressing underlying gender imbalances or structural inequalities that create demand for CRMs (Kukreja, 2018b). This representational framework constructs CRBs as either helpless victims requiring rescue or cultural threats to social stability, systematically erasing their agency and the complex negotiations they undertake within constrained circumstances (Khan, 2013). The media narrative particularly emphasizes regional and linguistic differences, portraying cross-regional wives as cultural outsiders who threaten community cohesion and traditional values, which Mukherjee (2013) argues reflects broader anxieties about maintaining distinct cultural identities in an increasingly interconnected India. Television reports and newspaper stories frequently employ dramatic language about "imported brides" and "purchased women" that reinforces stereotypes while obscuring the economic and demographic factors driving these marriages (The Guardian, 2018). This coverage creates public pressure for legal interventions and rescue operations that may actually harm the women they purport to protect by forcing them back into the poverty conditions that originally motivated their marriages. Critical scholarship has systematically challenged simplistic characterizations of CRMs such as trafficking or bride-buying, revealing more complex dynamics of agency and constraint that resist binary classifications (Kaur, 2004). Chaudhry and Mohan's (2011) detailed ethnographic analysis argued that these arrangements constituted "commercially mediated marriages" rather than

trafficking, emphasizing how families actively consent to or initiate these marriages under desperate economic constraints while maintaining agency within limited options. Their research reveals that families use distinct linguistic categories to differentiate legitimate arranged marriages (*vivaha*) from deceptive sales (*bikri*), suggesting sophisticated understanding of different types of marital arrangements and the moral boundaries that distinguish acceptable from unacceptable practices. This linguistic distinction proves crucial for understanding how participants themselves conceptualize their experiences and resist external categorizations that deny their decision-making capacity (Kaur, 2004). Mishra's (2013, 2017) extensive critique of media and NGO portrayals of CRMs challenges the trafficking narrative by documenting the heterogeneity of experiences and motivations involved in these unions. Her research reveals that many brides and families actively participate in decision-making processes despite limited options, demonstrating what she terms "constrained agency" that operates within structural limitations while maintaining elements of choice and negotiation. The research documents how parents and brides themselves reserve terms like "sale" for genuinely deceptive cases while using "marriage" for unions that follow customary rituals and meet family expectations for legitimate alliances. This insider perspective suggests that external observers often misinterpret economic transactions and pragmatic decision-making as evidence of commodification, failing to understand how families balance immediate survival needs with longer-term aspirations for their daughters (Mishra, 2017). Mukherjee's (2013, 2015) fieldwork in Haryana and West Bengal too reveals considerable heterogeneity in women's experiences, with many brides reporting agency within constrained circumstances rather than passive victimhood, though she acknowledges the structural vulnerabilities these women face due to poverty, social isolation, and dependence on husbands' families. Her research documents cases where women actively sought CRMs as escape routes from abusive families, failed local relationships, or impossible economic circumstances, challenging victimization narratives that deny women's capacity for strategic thinking and future planning. However, she also documents how structural vulnerabilities create conditions where genuine choice becomes difficult to distinguish from coerced acceptance of limited alternatives.

Kukreja's (2017, 2021 2024) extensive research across multiple districts acknowledges the commodification inherent in these transactions while arguing that extreme dowry pressures in sending regions effectively turn daughters into economic assets, creating gray zones between voluntary migration and coercive circumstances that resist simple

categorization. Her work reveals how marriage brokers sometimes knowingly falsify details about grooms' age, financial status, family circumstances, or regional background, raising legitimate concerns about deception and exploitation that cannot be dismissed as moral panic. The research demonstrates patterns where families discover after marriage that grooms are significantly older than represented, have substantial debts, suffer from addiction problems, or face social ostracism that was concealed during negotiations. These findings suggest that while outright trafficking represents one extreme of a complex spectrum, treating every CRM as such ignores the constrained agency of families who deliberately accept known risks in exchange for economic relief from dowry burdens and the guarantee that their daughters will marry at socially appropriate ages.

2.2.1 Between Constraints and Agency: Women's Journeys in CRMs

The lived experiences of CRBs reveal multiple layers of vulnerability stemming from cultural dislocation and social marginalization that extend far beyond initial marriage arrangements and affect every aspect of daily life in receiving communities (Mishra, 2013; Chaudhry, 2019b). Upon marriage, women typically experience complete geographic and social displacement, leaving their natal villages and kinship networks behind to enter their husbands' households in more patriarchal, unfamiliar settings where they must rapidly adapt to new customs without familiar support systems (Chaudhry, 2016, 2019b). This adaptation process encompasses multiple dimensions including adopting the ghunghat and more restrictive dress codes, converting to vegetarian dietary practices they may never have observed previously, learning new languages or dialects necessary for household communication, and navigating different kinship terminologies and social hierarchies that govern daily interactions (Mukherjee, 2015). The absence of natal family support creates particular vulnerabilities during conflicts or crises, as CRBs lack the protective networks that local brides can access through their mothers, sisters, and extended family members who remain geographically proximate and socially connected (Chaudhry, 2019a). Research consistently documents how linguistic barriers, social isolation, and complete dependence on husbands' families create conditions that significantly increase risks of domestic violence and neglect compared to local brides who retain connections to protective kinship networks (Mukherjee, 2015). The vulnerability proves particularly acute during the initial adjustment period when brides struggle to understand local customs, communicate effectively with family members, and establish their positions within household hierarchies (Kaur, 2023). Many CRBs report feeling like permanent strangers in their new communities, with few allies

beyond the immediate family that brought them in and limited access to informal support networks that help local women navigate marital difficulties (Singh, Dangi, & Bandyopadhyay, 2019).

The intersection of caste, gender, and regional identity creates particularly complex vulnerabilities for CRBs, especially those from the Dalit backgrounds married into dominant caste households where multiple forms of subordination operate simultaneously. Kukreja's (2018b) research reveals how these marriages function as tactical circumventions of local prohibitions on inter-caste marriage through fabricated high-caste identities for brides, while simultaneously reinforcing rather than challenging existing caste hierarchies through new forms of spatial and social exclusion. The geographic distance involved in these marriages inhibits inquiries about brides' actual caste backgrounds, allow fabrications about marriages to occur with relative ease, and prevent challenges to caste purity that local inter-caste marriages would inevitably provoke (Kukreja, 2018b, 2021). Rather than challenging caste boundaries, these marriages often reinforce them by allowing dominant caste men to access Dalit women sexually and reproductively while maintaining local caste purity through the fiction that these women belong to appropriate caste categories (Kukreja, 2024). The research documents how Dalit CRBs face intersecting oppressions of caste, gender, and patriarchy that exacerbate their subordination within both household and community contexts beyond what local Dalit women experience (Kukreja, 2021). These women must navigate not only the standard vulnerabilities of cross-regional displacement but also the additional burden of concealing their caste identities while adapting to higher-caste cultural practices they may find alien or oppressive. The constant risk of caste discovery creates psychological stress and limits their ability to form authentic relationships within their new communities, while their economic dependence prevents them from challenging discriminatory treatment they encounter (Singh et al., 2019).

Chaudhry's (2016) ethnographic work revealed how caste boundaries, rather than disappearing through geographic distance, become reconstituted through everyday practices of exclusion that mark difference and maintain hierarchies through subtler but persistent mechanisms. These practices included derogatory remarks about skin color that invoke regional and caste stereotypes, restrictions on commensality that limit CRBs' participation in family meals and religious ceremonies, refusal to arrange marriages between local families and the children of cross-regional couples, and social distancing that maintains boundaries without explicitly invoking caste categories (Chaudhry, 2016, 2019b). The research documented how community members use food transactions, marriage negotiations, and

everyday social interactions to signal that CRBs, and their children occupy ambiguous and subordinated positions within local caste hierarchies despite official acceptance of their marriages (Chaudhry, 2016, 2019a).

Recent psychological research has begun to examine the well-being outcomes for CRBs more systematically, revealing both the potential for positive change and the persistent challenges these women face. Singh, Dangi & Bandyopadhyay's (2019) groundbreaking intervention study with 67 CRBs across multiple districts in Haryana found that targeted psycho-social and cultural interventions could significantly improve their happiness levels, life satisfaction, and quality of life. Their seven-day community-based program, which focused on cultural awareness training, language learning, and psychological empowerment, demonstrated statistically significant improvements in happiness scores ($t= -2.74$; $p<.01$) among participants (Singh et al., 2019). The research revealed that 44.6% of participants reported positive changes in their lifestyle and well-being, with many stating that the intervention "showed them a way to be happy in Haryana." However, the study also highlighted the structural nature of many challenges these women face, with 28.4% of participants emphasizing that societal acceptance remained critical for genuine improvements in their lives, while others called for government pension schemes and family support to enhance their respect and dignity within households (Singh et al., 2019). This research suggests that while individual-level interventions can meaningfully improve CRBs' psychological well-being and cultural adaptation, sustainable happiness and integration require broader social and institutional changes that address the underlying stigma and marginalization these women experience in their new communities.

Research reveals that individual outcomes vary significantly based on multiple intersecting factors, including the bride's education level and communication skills, the receiving family's factors, economic status and social position, prevailing community attitudes toward outsiders, the specific regional and cultural distances involved in the marriage, and the presence of other cross-regional families that can provide reference points and support networks. However, systematic data on these differential outcomes remains limited, with most studies focusing on problems and vulnerabilities rather than tracking long-term integration patterns or success factors. In some cases, CRBs do become valued community members who contribute to local institutions and social networks, while in others they remain permanently marginalized despite years of residence and cultural adaptation, but comprehensive longitudinal research documenting these varied trajectories and their determinants is notably absent from the literature.

The scholarly consensus suggests that CRMs in rural North India represent neither simple victimization nor straightforward empowerment, but rather complex negotiations within structures of gender inequality, economic desperation, and demographic crisis that resist binary analytical frameworks.

2.2.2 The Next Generation: Unresolved Questions About Children of CRMFs

The emergence of CRMs in rural North India has created a generation of children whose experiences and social positioning remain inadequately understood within existing scholarship. While literature on CRBs has expanded considerably over the past two decades, research on their children represents one of the most significant gaps in understanding the long-term consequences of demographic change and marriage migration (Ankit, 2022). This lacuna is particularly concerning given that these children, now reaching adolescence and young adulthood in significant numbers, face complex challenges that intersect issues of identity, belonging, social mobility, and intergenerational transmission of disadvantage (Manisha & Ankit, 2024). Early scholarship on this phenomenon began with Kaur's pioneering longitudinal work, which raised fundamental questions about whether children born into such marriages would face differential trajectories based on gender (Kaur, 2004, 2008, 2013). Kaur (2004) initially hypothesized that daughters might be absorbed into local marriage markets while sons would be pushed to migrate like their fathers, potentially perpetuating cycles of displacement and marginalization. Chowdhry's concurrent research (2005, 2007) on masculinity crises in Haryana suggested that children from non-traditional families, like the CRMFs, might face particular psychological challenges and raised critical questions about their future inheritance rights and social recognition, particularly in communities where caste identity remains determinative of resource access. Chowdhry noted the difficulty women may face in proving their marriages occurred under legitimate circumstances and the implications this holds for their children's legal status and inheritance claims (Chowdhry, 2007).

As research progressed through the late 2000s, Kaur (2008) expanded her analysis to examine how local communities responded to these children as potential marriage partners, revealing the extent to which traditional endogamous practices remained rigid despite demographic pressures. Ahlawat's studies in Haryana (2009, 2012, 2013, 2014) hinted at complex patterns of differential integration based on economic factors, suggesting that financial status might override some concerns about mixed heritage. During this period,

researchers began documenting the social positioning challenges these children faced within rural hierarchies (Kukreja & Kumar, 2013). The early 2010s witnessed more systematic documentation of discrimination patterns. Kaur (2012, 2013) continued her longitudinal investigation, finding that discrimination against CRBs often became institutionalized through their children's marriage prospects. Her research revealed that the marriage prospects of these children served as a particularly sensitive indicator of whether CRMs represented temporary demographic adjustments or more profound transformations in social organization. Mukherjee's ethnographic work (2013) introduced the troubling finding that such offspring were often referred to as “people of low social esteem” within community discourse. Mid-decade research then shifted toward examining daily experiences and institutional discrimination. Mukherjee (2015) documented instances of discrimination faced by children from both teachers and peers, as well as exclusion from village festivals and social gatherings. Ahlawat (2015) furthered understanding economic factors in integration processes. Chaudhry’s ethnographic work in Uttar Pradesh suggested that local power dynamics significantly influenced children’s social positioning and noted that some families invest heavily in education as a strategy to compensate for social disadvantages, though comprehensive data on whether these investments translated into improved academic outcomes remained absent (Chaudhry, 2016). Mishra’s contributions (2017) examined particular challenges during adolescence when marriage negotiations begin and caste identities become crucial for family alliances, forcing young people to confront the limitations their mixed heritage imposed on their social mobility. This research raised the possibility that CRMs might be creating parallel marriage markets rather than integrating into existing local systems. Kukreja’s systematic documentation during this period (2017) revealed how practices of exclusion created lasting effects extending beyond the original brides to impact their children’s life chances and identity formation.

Recently, scholarships have focused on psychological dimensions and resilience factors. Mishra (2017) explored whether CRMs represented what she termed “crisis marriages” that communities tolerate during demographic emergencies but do not fully legitimize. Singh et al. (2019) conducted the first systematic intervention study, though focusing on mothers rather than children directly. Their research suggested that community-based programs could help improve social integration. Kukreja’s continued research (2021) explored whether stigmatization operates primarily through maternal lineage associations or whether factors like education or individual achievements could override concerns about

mixed heritage. Kukreja (2024) further found that some children from CRMs face difficulties obtaining official documents like birth certificates and caste certificates, affecting their access to government benefits and educational opportunities. Manisha and Ankit (2024) noted that systematic analysis of school enrollment patterns, educational attainment rates, and post-secondary aspirations among children from CRMFs compared to their peers remains absent.

Despite this growing body of research, critical gaps persist. The psychological well-being and mental health of children from CRMFs remain virtually unexplored, with no systematic investigation of their psychological adjustment, emotional development, or mental health outcomes. There is lack of comprehensive data on whether children from these families experience different health outcomes, growth patterns, or access to healthcare services compared to children from established local families. Questions about which children demonstrate greater resilience, what family or community factors promote positive adaptation, and how successful coping strategies can be fostered remain unanswered. From a theoretical perspective, the experiences of children from CRMFs challenge existing frameworks for understanding social mobility and identity formation in rural contexts. Traditional theories of social stratification assume relatively stable caste boundaries maintained through endogamous marriage practices (Dumont, 1980; Srinivas, 1962), but the emergence of CRMs and their mixed-heritage children create new forms of ambiguous positioning that existing theories struggle to address. Similarly, theories of identity formation typically assume relatively coherent cultural contexts providing clear reference points for developing self-concepts (Erikson, 1968), but these children must navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting cultural frameworks without clear guidance about reconciling competing expectations.

2.3 East Asian Cross-Border Marriage (CBM) Migration: Patterns and Parallels

2.3.1 China's Internal and CBM Flows

The sex ratio at birth (SRB) data in China increased steadily, reaching a peak of 121.2 in 2004, after rising from 107.2 boys per 100 girls in 1982 to 115 in 1994, while in certain provinces, particularly rural ones, it reached as high as 130 boys per 100 girls (UNFPA, 2018). The "fertility squeeze" of the one-child policy, which restricted family size and increased the demand for sons within a limited number of births, further exacerbated this severe imbalance (Jiang & Li, 2025). Consequently, couples pursued covert sex-selective practices in spite of the official prohibitions on prenatal sex determination (Cheng, 2018).

These demographic changes are fundamentally driven by a profound preference for male progeny, rooted in Confucian patriarchy and bolstered by rural families' dependence on sons for economic sustenance and ancestral rituals (Cheng, 2018; Das Gupta et al., 2003).

Economic disparities among provinces have fueled considerable inter-provincial marriage migration in recent times. Census data from 1990 recorded over 1.5 million inter-provincial marriage migrants, 90 percent of whom were women, typically originating from poorer southwestern provinces such as Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Guangxi and moving toward wealthier coastal regions like Hebei, Jiangsu, Fujian, Zhejiang, and Anhui (Fan & Huang, 1998). By 2000, marriage accounted for roughly 12 percent of all inter-provincial migration, reflecting both the allure of the urban opportunities and the persistent shortage of marriageable women in less affluent areas (Fan & Huang, 1998; Davin, 2007). Recent *hukou* reforms, effective May 2025, have further simplified cross-regional registration, allowing couples to register at their place of residence rather than through household registration, which has already facilitated over 492,000 such marriages by February 2025 (Xinhua, 2025).

Cross-border marriages (CBMs), particularly between Chinese men and Vietnamese women, have expanded from frontier towns into China’s interior. Driven by geographic proximity, ethnic ties, widening economic differentials, and broker networks, these unions have become increasingly common (Zhou, 2002; Yang & Shi, 2015). Vietnamese brides are generally younger (aged between 20 and 29 years) and less educated than their Chinese husbands, who are often over 30 and hold only elementary or secondary schooling (UNFPA, 2018). While some arrangements are consensual, documented cases of forced marriage, trafficking, and inflated brokerage fees rising from US $10,000–20,000 in 2016 to up to US $25,000 by 2020 underscore the vulnerabilities these women face (Chhun et al., 2022).

Children born of inter-provincial and CBMs occupy a distinctive legal and social position in China. Chinese nationality law grants citizenship through a Chinese father, enabling them to be registered in the *hukou* system and thereby access free compulsory education and state welfare benefits (UNFPA, 2018). This legal recognition is pivotal: it secures their entitlement to schooling, healthcare, and other public services and generally facilitates a smoother integration into local communities, particularly in rural areas where such families are often welcomed to mitigate the shortage of marriageable women (Sun, Zhao, & Zhao, 2025). Despite these formal protections, the lived experiences of these children vary. In many rural areas, they are viewed as legitimate members of society and benefit from parents’ collective efforts to improve household livelihoods (UNFPA, 2018).

Community attitudes tend toward neutrality or acceptance, and children are seldom subjected to overt discrimination (UNFPA, 2018). Nonetheless, subtle forms of exclusion, such as teasing over language difficulties or cultural differences when mothers lack fluent Mandarin or maintain strong cross-border ties, do occur, highlighting the complex negotiation of belonging these children undergo (Zhou, 2008). Moreover, the precarious legal status of some migrant brides can complicate family stability and, by extension, their children's sense of security. When marriages are unregistered, mothers risk statelessness, and restrictions on mobility and documentation may hinder family reunification and children's cross-border connections (Zhou, 2008). Although children typically receive *hukou* placement, their mothers' undocumented status can limit household mobility, access to social networks, and long-term stability of the family unit (UNFPA, 2018).

As inter-provincial and CBMs proliferate, the demographic and social trajectories of the children they produce remain underexplored. Existing research has focused predominantly on the experiences of migrant brides, leaving gaps in our understanding of these children's educational outcomes, bicultural identity formation, and long-term well-being (Chhun et al., 2022). Given their growing numbers and the unique interplay of legal, economic, and cultural factors that shape their lives, there is an urgent need for in-depth, longitudinal studies to trace how these children negotiate belonging, access resources, and contribute to the evolving tapestry of China's transregional communities (Yang & Shi, 2015; Cheng, 2018; UNFPA, 2018; Xinhua, 2025). China simultaneously serves as both cross-border bride destination and source, with mainland women marrying in Hong Kong and Taiwan, revealing East Asia's complex marriage migration patterns.

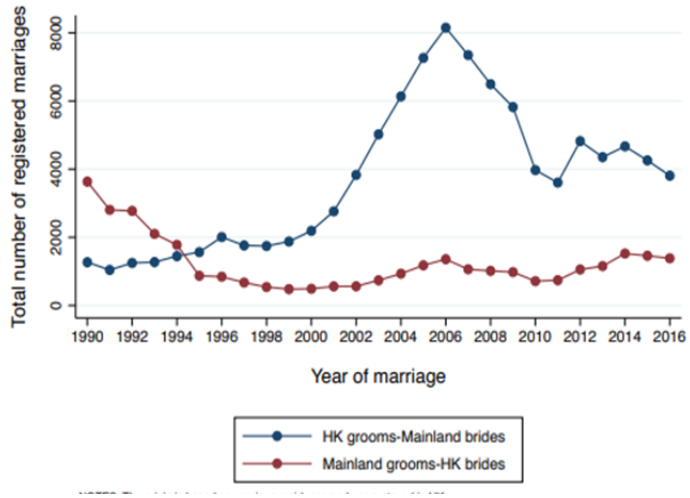
2.3.2 The Hong Kong-Taiwan-Mainland Triangle

CBMs between the mainland Chinese women and men from Hong Kong and Taiwan emerge from intersecting forces of socioeconomic inequality, gender norms, and state policies rather than purely individual choices (Jones & Shen, 2008). Local men of lower socio-economic status (SES) are driven to seek wives from outside their immediate national boundaries by class stratification and shifting gender roles in the context of demographic pressures (Chen & Yip, 2019; Davin, 2007). Women, on the other hand, perceive these unions as opportunities for upward mobility, security, and better opportunities for their children (Jones & Shen, 2008).

CBMs experienced a significant increase in Hong Kong, with nearly one-third of all marriages occurring by 2014 (Figure 2).

Figure 2

The Number of Registered Marriages in Hong Kong, by origins



Note: Reprinted from "The Hong Kong Marriage Market in the Past Three Decades," by S. Y. Ahn, E. Ciscato, and D. Zha, 2018, November 12. *Work in progress*, Columbia University.

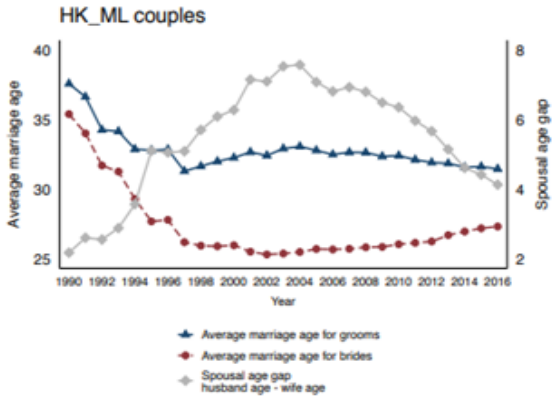
From 1986 to 2006, the number of Hong Kong men marrying mainland Chinese women was seven times higher than the reverse match (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department [HKCSD], 2015; Chen & Yip, 2019). In the context of increasing female socio-economic independence, this influx alleviates the "marriage squeeze" experienced by lower-SES men who are unable to locate local spouses, as well as by upwardly mobile women who are in search of foreign partners (Chen & Yip, 2019). The hypergamous nature of CBMs has intensified gender inequalities between the marriage migrants and their husbands in terms of socioeconomic resources and ideological traits. On the men's side, their less favorable SES has squeezed them out of the domestic marriage market (Chiu, 2017). To retain their male supremacy, they turn to the CBM market to look for a submissive wife. On the women's side, women from less developed regions are inclined to marry men with higher SES for economic security and social mobility, not only for themselves but also for their families back home (Chiu, 2017). These logics have encouraged low-SES men to marry foreign women with even lower SES. Consequently, the cross-border couple's gendered power relationship heavily favors men. Situated in this unequal power relationship, with inadequate economic resources, marriage migrants are unwillingly dependent on their husbands, which in turn traps them in abusive marriages when violence occurs (Chiu, 2017). A median age difference of nine years

has been noted in these marriages, reinforcing the stereotype of middle-aged or older Hong Kong men marrying younger Mainland women (Ornellas, 2014).

Hong Kong men who marry mainland spouses typically have lower incomes, limited education, and blue-collar occupations, and they enter unions with an average eight-year age gap, more than twice that of local couples, intensifying power asymmetries in language fluency, citizenship status, and financial decision-making (Choi, Cheung, & Cheung, 2012; Lin & Ma, 2008; Weiss, Yi, & Zhang, 2018).

Figure 3

Average Age of Marriage and Spousal Age Gap Between Hong Kong Men and Mainland China Women



Note: Reprinted from "The Hong Kong Marriage Market in the Past Three Decades," by S. Y. Ahn, E. Ciscato, and D. Zha, 2018, November 12. *Work in progress*, Columbia University.

Figure 4

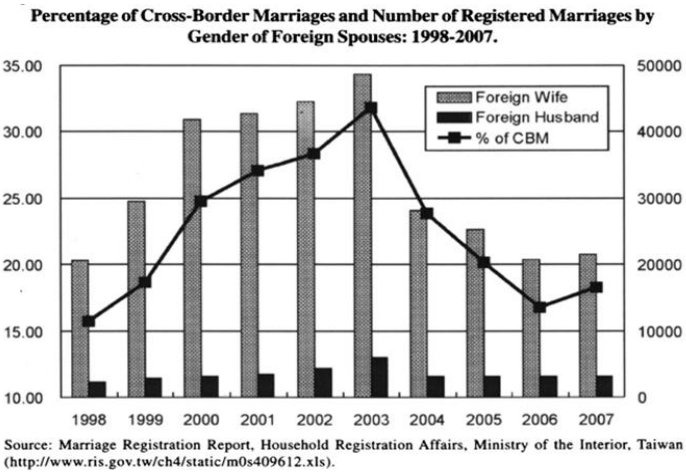
Average Age of Marriage and Spousal Age Gap Between Hong Kong Men and Hong Kong Women

Note: Reprinted from "The Hong Kong Marriage Market in the Past Three Decades," by S. Y. Ahn, E. Ciscato, and D. Zha, 2018, November 12. *Work in progress*, Columbia University.

In the same vein, Taiwan's marriage-migration phenomenon has been even more pronounced (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Percentage of CBMs and Number of Registered Marriages by Gender of Foreign Spouses: 1998-2007

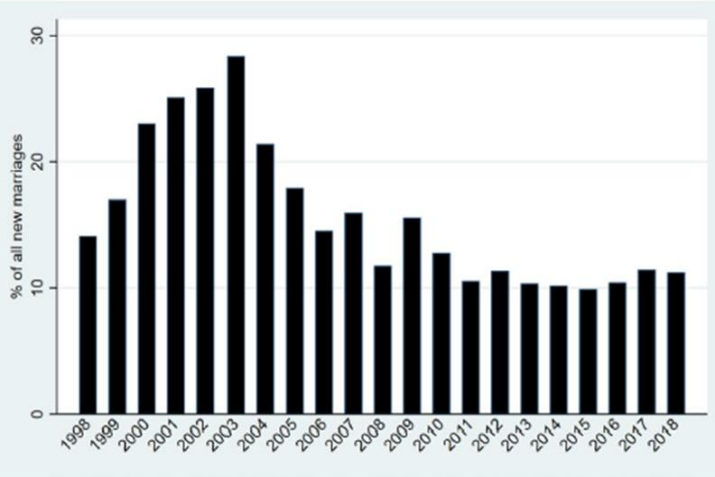


Note. Reprinted from "The Significance of Cross-Border Marriage in a Low Fertility Society: Evidence from Taiwan," by Y.-H. Chen, 2008, *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *39*(3), p. 335. Copyright 2008 by University of Toronto Press.

In 2002, foreign brides comprised 27.4% of all unions, with over 160,000 female marriage migrants by the early 2000s, 68% of whom were from mainland China (Lin, 2012). The majority of the remaining women were Vietnamese, increasing dramatically from 1,476 in 1995 to over 60,000 by 2003, constituting 20.5% of foreign wives by 2010, followed by Indonesians and other Southeast Asians (Davin, 2007; Wang, 2001; Lu, 2005). Most mainland Chinese brides are of the Han ethnic group, with just a few exceptions from ethnic minority communities. Their places of origin are rather diverse, with the highest number coming from the coastal province of Fujian, with some from inland provinces such as Sichuan and Hunan (Chia-wen Lu, 2005). Between 1998 and 2018, Taiwan witnessed notable shifts in the proportion of new marriages involving female marriage migrants (Qian & Tsai, 2022). The data reveals a sharp rise in such marriages in the early 2000s, peaking around 2003 when nearly 30% of all new unions included foreign brides (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Female Marriage Migrants as a Percentage of All New Marriages in Taiwan (1998–2018)



Note. Reprinted from "Relative Economic Position and Female Marriage Migration: Marrying Men in Taiwan Across Borders and Boundaries," by Z. Qian and M.-C. Tsai, 2022, *Population Research and Policy Review*, *41*, p. 1454. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-021-09696-x Copyright 2022 by Springer Nature B.V.

This surge likely reflected a combination of relaxed migration policies, expansion of marriage brokerage industries, and regional gender imbalances that made CBMs particularly appealing, especially among men in rural areas. By 2018, the rate had dropped significantly, pointing to a transformed landscape of marriage migration shaped by evolving national priorities and public sentiment. This demographic imbalance is deeply connected to changing

gender norms and marriage patterns in both territories. As women in Hong Kong and Taiwan have attained higher education and economic independence, a significant number have opted out of marriage altogether or have sought spouses abroad, thus creating a so-called “marriage squeeze” that particularly affects men with limited educational and economic prospects (Chen, 2013). The socioeconomic profiles of these cross-border marriage families (CBMFs) reflect further structural disadvantage (Chen, 2013). In Taiwan, Vietnamese women, who comprise the majority of Southeast Asian brides, frequently marry Taiwanese men who have not completed secondary education. A significant number of these men reside in rural areas (Jones & Shen, 2008). According to Wang (2001), a significant number of Taiwanese men who marry Southeast Asian spouses have only completed junior high school, with only 8% possessing a college degree. Consequently, these families are inclined to be in lower income brackets, and a significant number of them encounter difficulty in obtaining sufficient social and economic resources. With the exception of the Hakka community, who clearly favor Hakka women from Indonesia and mainland China, empirical research indicates that the majority of Taiwanese husbands and their families do not have a clear preference regarding the ethnicity of the brides (Chen, 2013). Furthermore, Taiwanese males rarely marry foreign women who are already employed in Taiwan as domestic helpers, according to empirical data. In other words, even though there are many chances for everyday interaction, maids and prostitutes rarely end up becoming brides (Chen, 2013). Taiwanese men turn to marriage brokers and matchmakers while they are looking for wives. Wu (2004) noted that compared to Taiwanese women, foreign spouses have comparatively lower educational levels. These foreign wives typically have a secondary school education. Match patterns are further complicated by remarriages; in Hong Kong, at least one partner's second union is involved in 30% of transnational marriages. Furthermore, studies have shown that second marriages are more unstable and have a greater divorce rate than first marriages (Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Martin & Bumpass, 1989; McCarthy, 1978). These marriages are women-heterogamous in age but maintain educational homogamy across both first and subsequent marriages (Lin & Ma, 2008; Chen & Yip, 2019). Notably, Hong Kong women remarrying mainland men exhibit more educational hypogamy, whereas those marrying Western men practice hypergamy (Chen & Yip, 2019).

Institutionalized matchmaking in Taiwan and informal networks in Hong Kong commodifies intimacy. Taiwanese grooms are required to pay broker agencies between $10,000 and $15,000, with some of these agency’s advertising “after-sales service” or

"buying a wife," with a portion allotted as dowry to the bride's family, a sum that represents a considerable windfall in the bride's country of origin (Hsia, 2010). This practice transforms marriage into an economic transaction that perpetuates global gender hierarchies (Davin, 2007; Constable, 2005; Hsia, 2010). Women are selected quickly and brought to Taiwan through structured migration channels, which has led scholars to describe the phenomenon as "commodified marriage migration" (Davin, 2007; Hsia, 2010). Hong Kong marriages rely less on commercial brokers and more on kinship and social gatherings, yet migrant wives still face heavy dependence on husbands for survival (Chiu & Choi, 2019).

Motivations differ by gender: men often seek younger, "traditional" wives perceived as having lower expectations for economic reciprocity, reflecting patriarchal anxieties about eroding gender roles, while women pursue stable immigration routes, financial resources, and enhanced prospects for their offspring (Chen & Yip, 2019; Hsia, 2006; Chiu, 2017). For many mainland women, marriage is the sole legal channel to resettle in Hong Kong or Taiwan (Lu, 2008; Zani, 2023). Some women re-migrate to Taiwan through marriage, which is a prerequisite for legally entering and settling in the territory (Lu, 2008). These marriages expose women to acute vulnerabilities. Hong Kong's One-Way Permit (OWP) system forces mainland spouses to endure four to five years of separation before reunification, enabling husbands to mask debts, gambling, or violence (Chiu, 2017). In Taiwan, residency rights for mainland wives are highly conditional. Article 31 of the Immigration Act establishes a correlation between residency and marital status. Consequently, divorce can result in the deportation of both the CBMF mother and, in effect, her children, thereby establishing a system of "marital citizenship" that compels women to remain in unions to protect their fundamental rights (Lan, 2019). An 'interior frontier' (Balibar, 2002) is built within the state's perimeter, enclosing women's biographical and mobility experiences inside the intimate and sexualized sphere of marriage and domesticity. When marriage turns into the only legal condition for migration, the dialectics between mobility and location become intrinsic to governmentality (Ong, 1999). Sheu's (2007) study of immigrant wives in Taiwan found that CBMs create a paradox where women bear full social and reproductive responsibilities while possessing only "partial citizenship" due to restrictive naturalization policies. It also reveals that these women face gender discrimination and unfulfilled rights as they navigate between fulfilling their natal families' expectations and meeting their in-laws' reproductive demands. The spousal sponsorship system increases immigrant women's vulnerability and violates their human rights by making naturalization extremely difficult.

Despite the shared cultural background between Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, immigrant women face significant barriers to social and familial integration (Kung, 2013). Language barriers, social isolation, and stigmatizing media discourses compound these structural inequities. The language gap impedes their ability to communicate with their husbands, in-laws, and local authorities, contributing to feelings of isolation and disempowerment. Mainland brides in Hong Kong struggle with Cantonese fluency, while most Southeast Asian spouses in Taiwan often arrive with no Mandarin background, hindering integration and fostering dependence (Gu & Tong, 2020). Many women also face restricted mobility, with husbands or their families actively discouraging contact with peers from similar backgrounds, fearing that such socialization might undermine the woman's integration into the host family's cultural expectations (Yu, 2006; Palriwala & Uberoi, 2005). Women living in cities may experience greater independence but often report social isolation and exclusion from broader community life (Chen, 2013). Public narratives cast migrant women as opportunistic or submissive, reinforcing "spoiled identities" and the perception that they exploit welfare systems without contributing cultural capital (Goffman, 1968; Chen, 2013; Kung, 2013; Lu, 2008). Misunderstandings are frequent, as women's expectations of marriage, often shaped by idealized narratives of modern life abroad, clash with the realities of economic hardship, limited autonomy, and conservative gender roles in their new households (Chen, 2013). Moreover, without access to robust support systems, women discover it difficult to assert themselves, especially when faced with marital conflict or violence. Studies have shown that migrant women face elevated risks of intimate partner violence due to their isolated status, language barriers, and financial dependence (Erez, Adelman, & Gregory, 2009; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). According to a 2007 survey conducted in Hong Kong, 38.6% of female marriage migrants reported psychological abuse, 12.6% physical abuse, and 13.8% sexual abuse within the previous year. These figures were significantly higher than those of local women (Choi et al., 2012). The isolation of migrant women also limits their access to support networks. Many women report having little or no support from family or friends, making them more reliant on their husbands and in-laws for both emotional and practical support (Choi et al., 2012; Chiu, 2017). Similarly, in Taiwan, matchmakers are often the only source of assistance for brides in distress, but their support is informal and unreliable, depending on individual willingness rather than institutional backing (Jordan, 1999).

Chiu (2017) highlighted how mainland brides in Hong Kong attached to their natal families despite facing cultural constraints. In traditional Chinese patriarchal culture, family honor and saving face are paramount, protecting both individuals and families from shame (Yu, 2005). Because domestic violence is considered shameful, some battered marriage migrants choose silence to protect their natal families from disgrace. This concealment intensifies their isolation from natal support systems. Even when battered immigrant wives wish to leave abusive situations, they require emotional and material support from natal families. However, to avoid criticism and family disgrace, immediate and extended family members often fail to provide support, instead trivializing abuse or pressuring women to remain silent rather than seek divorce (Chiu, 2017). In Taiwan, these foreign wives make a substantial contribution to the birth rates. As early as 2002, one in every eight children born in Taiwan had a foreign-born mother, highlighting their demographic impact (Tseng et al., 2021). Government studies from 2004 and 2008 indicated that between 50% and 70% of immigrant wives had given birth after their arrival in Taiwan (Shiao & Chiang, 2012). The Ministry of the Interior tracks official data on births by mother's nationality, allowing for ongoing analysis.

CBMs linking mainland Chinese women with men from Hong Kong and Taiwan have generated a substantial second generation whose lives unfold amid overlapping structures of gender, migration, and citizenship (Jones & Shen, 2008; Choi & Guo, 2017). While these unions initially reflect strategies for socioeconomic mobility and demographic management, children born into these families inhabit liminal legal and social spaces that shape their identities, educational trajectories, and civic inclusion (To, 2020). Children of CBMFs in Hong Kong face entrenched civic stratification. Born to mainland Chinese mothers who must navigate the OWP system, these children formally qualify for Hong Kong residency but often encounter exclusion in everyday life (To, 2019). Local policies grant full citizenship rights at birth, yet linguistic and cultural tensions between Cantonese-speaking Hong Kongers and Mandarin-speaking mainlanders persist, positioning them as perpetual outsiders (Hsia, 2021; Lan, 2019). To (2020) demonstrates that children in cross-border stepfamilies play varied roles: they can be a source of marital conflict, stability, or disruption, depending on their relationship to each parent. The prolonged wait of up to five years for legal reunification exacerbates family separation, imposing emotional strain on parent–child relationships and allowing husbands to obscure debts, gambling problems, or abusive behaviors (Chiu, 2017). To (2019) further adds that children are often treated more favorably than their migrant

mothers in the eyes of the state, benefiting from a higher civic value due to their perceived future economic contribution to Hong Kong. This civic stratification reflects systemic biases in immigration and welfare policies that differentially value family members.

In Taiwan, the second generation lives under a “marital citizenship” regime, where residency rights hinge on the stability of their parents’ marriage (Lan, 2019). Initially, the state pursued “reproductive assimilation,” closely regulating immigrant mothers’ reproductive health and parenting to safeguard the perceived quality of the national population. This shifted to “neoliberal multiculturalism,” framing immigrant families’ cultural differences as assets for global competitiveness (Lan, 2019). Yet, despite this rhetorical shift, underlying inequalities persisted as diversity was commodified without genuine integration. Legal provisions, such as Article 31 of the Immigration Act, expose immigrant mothers and their children to precarity, as divorce can result in deportation or statelessness, deterring women from leaving abusive marriages and fragmenting families. Even with residency, mothers face continued scrutiny to uphold normative maternal roles (Williams & Yu, 2006; Lan, 2019). In the event that their mothers are deported and their fathers fail to assume custody, the dissolution of a marriage can render children effectively stateless (Williams & Yu, 2006). Limited access to educational or health services is a common occurrence for these children, who are caught between two cultures and legal systems.

Educational outcomes for children of CBMFs demonstrate significant disparities. In Hong Kong, studies reveal that children of mainland mothers lag behind peers in language proficiency, owing to Mandarin-Cantonese barriers, and are less likely to access high-quality schooling in elite districts (Gu & Tong, 2020; Lin, 2005). Similarly, in Taiwan, children of Southeast Asian and Chinese migrant mothers score lower on standardized tests than those with native-born parents (Wu, Bradley, & Chiang, 2011; Chen, 2013). Pei-Chia Lan's analysis demonstrates that CBMFs exhibit significantly lower levels of within-family social capital, parental educational expectations, preschool attendance, and parent-child interactions, which exacerbates children's academic performance (Lan, 2020). Community context exacerbates these gaps: economically disadvantaged families are often excluded from affluent school zones and, even when admitted, face systemic marginalization that limits their children’s benefit from available resources (Lan, 2020). Stigma and discrimination further compound structural barriers. Media portrayals in both territories cast migrant wives as gold-

diggers or victims, and by extension, their children inherit spoiled identities (Goffman, 1968; Chen, 2013). In Taiwan, the derogatory label “dalumei” for mainland brides extends to their offspring, branding them as uncultured or linked to illicit migration (Lu, 2008). In Hong Kong, second-generation children are often perceived as welfare burdens who lack the cultural capital to integrate fully (Kung, 2013). These negative social narratives undermine children’s self-esteem, foster identity conflicts, and intensify feelings of belonging-lessness in school and community settings (Liao & Wang, 2013; Chin & Yu, 2009). Despite these challenges, children play active roles in cross-border stepfamilies. To (2020) highlights that children can either buffer or escalate marital tensions: they may reinforce parental bonds through caregiving and emotional labor or become focal points of conflict when negotiations over citizenship and resources arise. In families where mothers endure isolation, children sometimes assume translator or cultural mediator roles, negotiating between their mother’s mainland dialect and the local language of Cantonese or Taiwanese. This filial responsibility enhances children’s agency but can also burden them with adult-like roles that impede normal childhood development (To, 2020).

Language dynamics within the home shape children’s bicultural competences. Gu and Tong (2020) demonstrate that Hong Kong families use deliberate “family language policies” to cultivate Cantonese proficiency, believing it key to social mobility. Mothers, however, often lack access to language classes or community support, and husbands may discourage interaction with other mainland families to prevent perceived “undermining” of assimilation. As a result, children navigate a hybrid linguistic space, speaking Mandarin or Putonghua at home and Cantonese at school, resulting in a fluid but frequently incomplete mastery of both languages (Gu & Tong, 2020). In Taiwan, Southeast Asian brides’ limited Mandarin proficiency similarly restricts children’s bilingual development; many children struggle with Mandarin literacy despite formal education, relying instead on peers and school interventions for language learning.

Institutional responses have begun to address educational and social integration gaps, albeit unevenly. Taiwan’s Ministry of Education introduced after-school care and multicultural curricula to support children of migrant mothers, yet implementation varies by locality and often depends on local resources and political will (Ministry of Education, 2005; Ho, 2003). Community-based NGOs offer language classes, parent-child playgroups, and cultural exchange workshops, providing vital informal support networks that foster social

capital among migrant families (Tsai, Chen, & Huang, 2011). In Hong Kong, recruitment of Cantonese tutors for mainland brides and school-based whole-school language policies aim to bridge linguistic divides, but resource constraints and stigma within schools limit their effectiveness (Choi et al., 2012).

When navigating identity across two societies, second-generation individuals employ diverse boundary-making strategies. Lan's (2024) interviews with 57 adult children in Taiwan reveal three distinct approaches to identity formation. The first strategy involves asserting a singular Taiwanese or Hong Kong identity while suppressing awareness of their maternal immigrant background to avoid stigmatization and align with the dominant national group. This approach proves particularly viable for those who exhibit phenotypic similarities to the majority population, though geopolitical tensions between Taiwan and mainland China sometimes compel individuals to actively distance themselves from their mainland heritage. The second strategy sees emerging adults embrace hybrid identities by drawing on language skills, cuisine, and personal ties to mainland China, Vietnam, or Indonesia. This biculturalism flourishes under state-led multiculturalism initiatives, such as Taiwan’s New Southbound Policy frames cultural diversity as valuable economic and diplomatic capital. Individuals who successfully deploy bicultural assets often pursue careers in translation, international trade, or cultural industries where their cross-cultural competencies provide professional advantages. The third strategy involves a defensive stance where individuals distance themselves from both their mother's heritage and mainstream national identity. This approach typically emerges from experiences of discrimination or cultural dislocation, leading some individuals to reject categorical labels entirely and construct personal identities outside conventional national frameworks (Lan, 2024). These identity strategies reflect ongoing negotiation between structural constraints and individual agency. Despite the Taiwanese state's rhetorical shift to "neoliberal multiculturalism," residual assimilationist policies and societal suspicion frequently continue to shape children's lived experiences (Lan, 2019). Hong Kong’s civic hierarchy similarly values children’s potential economic contributions but offers limited pathways for genuine social inclusion (To, 2019; Gu & Tong, 2020).

Health and psychosocial outcomes further illustrate the second generation’s uneven integration. Lee (2020) reports that late school-aged children from multicultural families score lower on health behavior measures, influenced by school adjustment difficulties, mother-child relational quality, and children’s own health perceptions. Adolescents from

CBMFs exhibit higher rates of depression and lower body satisfaction, with socio-economic status and parental educational levels serving as key mediators of mental well-being (Choi, 2021). These findings underscore the interplay between material disadvantages and emotional resilience among the second generation. Despite systemic obstacles, resilience and adaptation are evident. In Taiwan, proactive mothers enroll in community language programs and form informal support groups that bolster both their own and their children's integration (Tsai, Chen, & Huang, 2011). Some families leverage multicultural education initiatives to celebrate dual heritage, organizing festivals, language camps, and cultural exchanges that valorize their children's diverse backgrounds. Second-generation young children increasingly act as cultural intermediaries, volunteering in NGOs, mentoring peers, and influencing school policies to promote inclusivity.

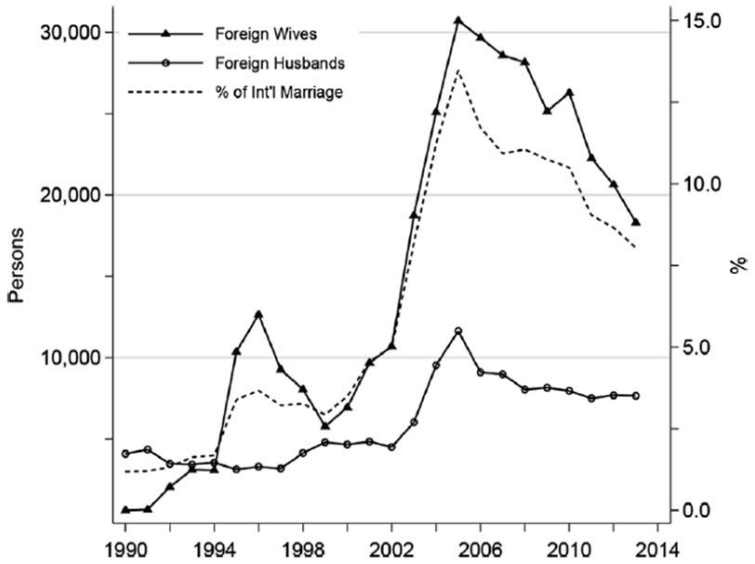
Scholarly efforts call for deeper intersectional and longitudinal research in this vulnerable second generation. Analyzing how class, gender, and national identity intersect offers insight into the mechanisms sustaining inequality and pathways for intervention (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002). Governmentality frameworks illuminate how states govern intimate life through marriage, residency, and childrearing policies as these factors shape not only adult migrants but also the formative experiences of their children (Ong, 1999; Foucault, 1984). As CBMs persist in scale and complexity, the children they produce stand at the forefront of Asia's evolving demographic and cultural landscapes. Their experiences, marriageability prospects, marked by marginalization and agency, exclusion and resilience, challenge simplistic narratives of assimilation or victimhood.

2.3.3 The Southeast Asian Pipeline: Marriage Migration to Korea and Japan

CBMs in South Korea and Japan have risen dramatically over the past three decades, driven by intersecting demographic shifts and socioeconomic transformations (Kim, 2017; Shikita, 2014; see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Trends in International Marriages in South Korea, 1990-2013



Note. Reprinted from "Cross-Border Marriages in South Korea and the Challenges of Rising Multiculturalism," by K. Kim, 2017, *International Migration*, *55*(4), p. 2. https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12331

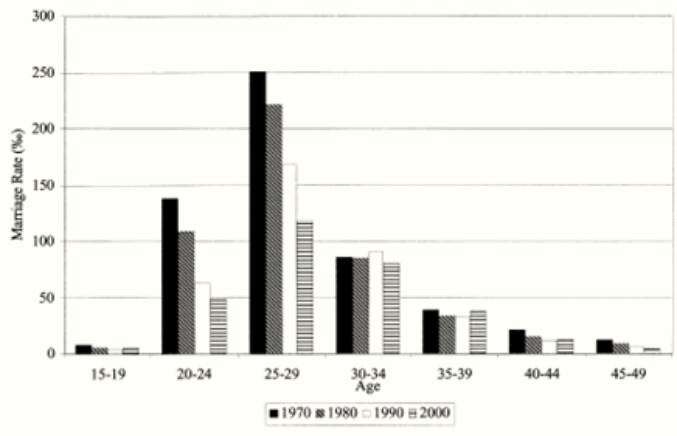
From 2005 to 2014, there were 245,904 marriages between Korean husbands and foreign-born wives in Korea, which accounted for 74.6 percent of all international unions (Statistics Korea, 2020). Despite the fact that migrant flows are predominantly male, marriage migration is over 80 percent female. Additionally, migrant stocks from China, Vietnam, and Thailand have increased by 771 percent, 910 percent, and 4,230 percent, respectively, since 2000 (UN DESA, 2020). Similarly, Japan's international marriages increased from 5,000 in 1970 to 26,657 by 1993, accounting for 3.4 percent of all marriages (Sadamatsu, 1996). Foreign wives comprised 75 percent of these marriages, with 32 percent Filipinas, 25 percent Koreans, and 23 percent Chinese women (Suzuki, 2000). This made Southeast and Northeast Asian women the largest spouse groups (Bauzon, 1999; Ishii, 1996). The structural changes in the marriage markets in Korea and Japan closely correlate with the rise in such marriages. Rapid industrialization, urban migration, and expanded female education reshaped local marriage markets (Yamada, 1996; Raymo, 2003). In rural Korea, 71.7 percent of men aged 30–34 are unmarried, compared to a national average of 50.2 percent (Statistics Korea, 2011; Kim, 2012). Korean men, particularly rural men who are often older, less educated, and economically disadvantaged, struggle to find wives (Kang,

1999). Many Korean women avoid such matches due to the burden of caring for in-laws and patriarchal household structures. Korean husbands tend to hold more traditional views on gender roles and expect wives to manage domestic life independently (Koo, 2007).

In Japan, increasing workplace demands on women and limited childcare options delay marriage, while hypergamous preferences, where women pursue partners of equal or greater socioeconomic status, result in a lack of local spouses for working-class men in depopulated areas (Blossfeld, 1995; Raymo, 2003; Truong, 1996). Local matches are further hindered by traditional gender norms in Korea, where women are responsible for primary housework and childcare (Kim, 2012; Kang, 1999; Koo, 2007), and Japanese men's low domestic labor contributions reinforce this divide (Kamo, 1994; Tsuya & Mason, 1995). Japan is notable among industrialized nations for the inverse correlation between women's educational achievement and marriage rates. Theoretical interpretations of this relationship underscore gender asymmetry in domestic labor, contending that the perceived or actual benefits of marriage are diminished by women's economic independence, particularly in situations where work-family balance is challenging (Blossfeld, 1995; Ono, 2003; Raymo, 2003). Thus, more and more Japanese women are postponing marriage and child-rearing. In the age-specific first marriage rates of Japanese women between 1970 and 2000, women aged 25–29 consistently had the highest rates of first marriage, peaking in 1980. Over time, marriage rates declined for both younger women (15–19, 20–24) and older groups (30–34 and above), reflecting a societal trend toward later marriage (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Trends in Age-Specific First Marriage Rates of Japanese Women, 1970–2000



Note. Reprinted from "Marriage Market Mismatches in Japan: An Alternative View of the Relationship between Women's Education and Marriage," by J. M. Raymo and M. Iwasawa,

2005, *American Sociological Review*, *70*(5), p. 804. Copyright 2005 by the American Sociological Association.

Meanwhile, men gain little from marrying career-oriented women, given the continued expectation that females should perform caregiving roles. They continue seeking wives perceived as "traditional," "obedient," and dedicated to caregiving and household tasks. The hypergamous preferences and occupational disparities have created pronounced mismatches in the marriage market (Akers, 1967; Lichter et al., 1992; Wilson & Neckerman, 1987; Yamada, 1996).

To fill these marital gaps, both states and private brokers institutionalized cross-border matchmaking. Since the early 1990s, Korean local governments have implemented "Let the rural bachelor get married" campaigns and subsidized bride tours to Southeast Asia (Bui, 2022). Matchmakers now offer a comprehensive "marriage package" that includes airfare, ceremonies, dowries, translation, and visa processing, which is now complemented by mandatory language and cultural training that lasts for six months or more (Onishi, 2007; Lee et al., 2016; Hoang, 2013). After the marriage, the groom returns to Korea while the bride remains behind to apply for a marriage migrant visa (Onishi, 2007). Since the 2010s, stricter visa regulations have required language proficiency and cultural training, delaying the migration process to six months or more. The rural "hanayome-san" (foreign brides) boom in Japan is also reliant on agencies that charge between US $15,000 and $30,000 to screen brides based on their family background and education, conduct week-long matchmaking tours, organize symbolic ceremonies and honeymoons, and subsequently complete registration and visas over the course of several months (del Rosario, 1994; McKay, 2003; Nakamatsu, 2003). Scholars widely agree that economic motivations play a central role in women's decisions to participate in these arrangements (Lee et al., 2016; Hoang, 2013). Women's motivations for engaging in these arrangements encompass factors such as economic advancement, better socioeconomic status, remitting money to their families, educational opportunities for children, freedom from constrictive familial ties, and transnational aspirations (Piper, 1997; Nakamatsu, 2003). Nonetheless, the institutional and interpersonal structures of these marriages create asymmetries of power. The age gap between spouses is often significant, and the women frequently enter unfamiliar, patriarchal domestic spaces where they are expected to perform intensive caregiving and household work (Kim, 2012; Koo, 2007). Upon arrival, many encounter significant language barriers, cultural

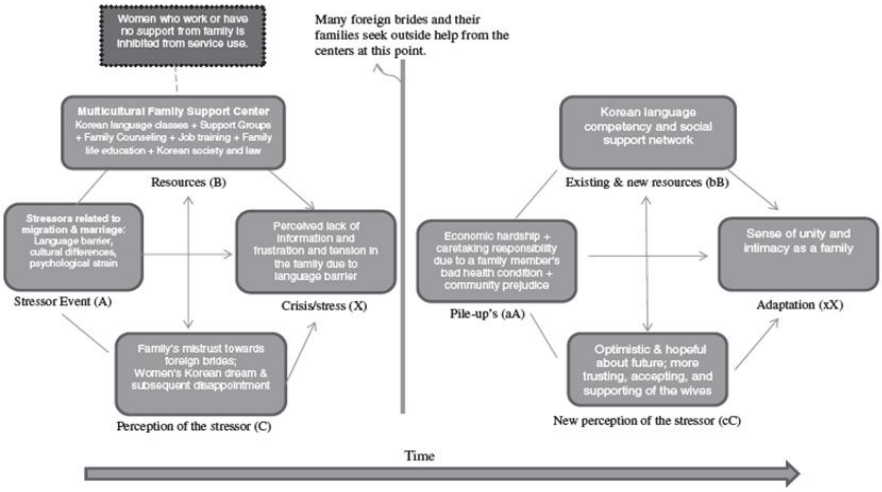
dissonance, and social isolation, which impede daily communication, access to services, and childrearing in unfamiliar environments (Wu, 2006; Mo & Lai, 2004). Using data from 514 foreign brides in Korea's 2017 Marriage Brokerage Survey, Agu (2022) found that communication conflicts significantly reduced marital satisfaction, while age and education level showed no relationship with marital satisfaction. Interestingly, having paid employment was associated with lower marital satisfaction among foreign brides. The findings suggest that addressing communication barriers in cross-cultural marriages is crucial for improving relationship outcomes in Korea's multicultural families. These difficulties can extend beyond the marital sphere, particularly affecting their ability to raise children in culturally unfamiliar environments, especially when compounded by a lack of medical, childcare, or social support and limited economic independence. Research indicates that foreign brides endure physical abuse, conflicts with in-laws in addition to challenging eldercare responsibilities, low-wage employment in factories or retail, and insufficient support networks (Chang, 2018, 2020).

Institutional support often reinforces dependency. The 2008 Multicultural Family Support Act in Korea established more than 170 centers by 2017, which provided language training, counseling, and job placement. These services were criticized for prioritizing assimilation over rights-bearing individual empowerment (Bui, 2022; Lan, 2019). Prior to 2008, various local community centers offered Korean language classes and childrearing support, although it was not common until around 2000 to find a community center that provided such services. According to the 2010 Guide for Multicultural Family Support Centers (Ministry of Health & Welfare, 2010), mandatory services that these centers are required to provide include Korean language classes, job training, counseling, support groups, family life education, and courses designed to learn about legal, economic, and social systems in Korea at no or minimal cost (Figure 9). For instance, the participation rate for Korean language classes increased from 21.8% in 2006 to 50.6% in 2009, whereas for family counselling service the rate went up from 10.0% to 28.1%. However, Jang’s (2022) study of Multicultural Family Support Centers found that these government-funded programs reinforce traditional gender and cultural hierarchies by teaching migrant wives Confucian family roles emphasizing home management and subservience to husbands and in-laws. Through case studies of cultural and cooking classes, the research revealed that Korea's multiculturalism model focuses on one-way assimilation, with limited expectations for Korean families to adapt while migrant wives from developing countries are expected to

conform to traditional Korean family structures with little opportunity to influence or resist these expectations.

Figure 9

Use of Multicultural Family Support Centers and Adjustment Among Foreign Brides and Their Families in South Korea

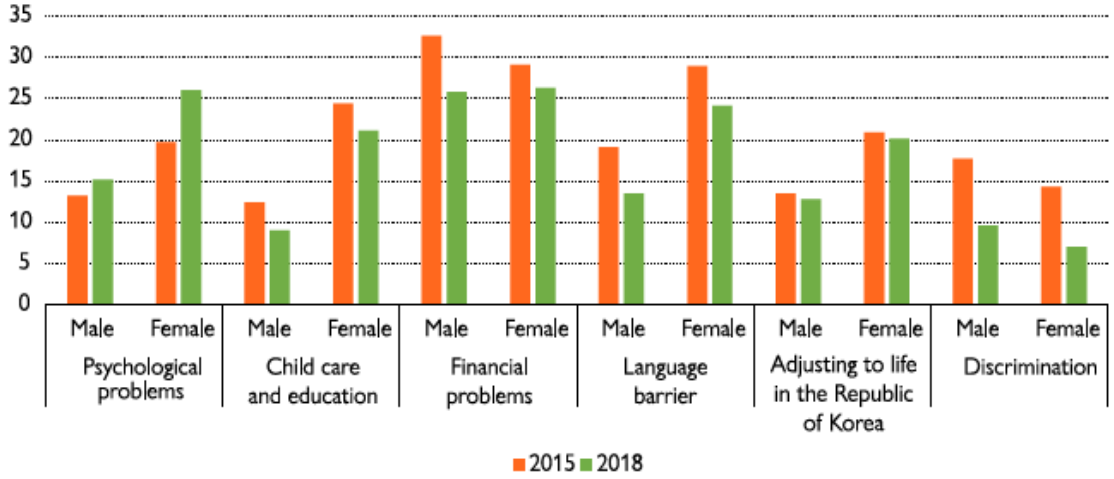


Note. Reprinted from "Using the Multicultural Family Support Centers and Adjustment Among Interethnic and Interracial Families in South Korea," by G. H. Chung and J. P. Yoo, 2013, *Family Relations*, *62*(2), p. 246. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2012.00754.x Copyright 2013 by Wiley.

When they get to Korea, the hardest thing for foreign brides is getting used to their new family and the new culture, even though they don't speak the language or understand it well. Most marriages between people of different races and cultures are quickly set up through matching services and religious groups (Kim et al., 2009). This means that a Korean husband and his foreign wife probably don't know much about each other before they get married. Lack of trust and faith is a common problem for mixed-race and interethnic partners because it can cause them to be too controlling and misunderstand each other, especially in the beginning (Kim, 2018). It might be harder for them to understand each other's wants and needs if they don't speak the same language (Koo, 2007; see Figure 10).

Figure 10

Percentage of Multicultural Family Migrants Experiencing Difficulties in Korea by Difficulty Type and Gender, 2015 and 2018



Note. Reprinted from "Migration Data and Marriage Migrants in the Republic of Korea," by T. Lee, 2022, International Organization for Migration, p. 21.

In Japan, foreign wives are not included in their husbands' *koseki* (family registry) until they have completed full naturalization. The spousal F-6 visa in Korea and the general spousal visa in Japan are one-to-five-year permits that are renewable only if marriages continue. Upon separation, women may be subjected to deportation, custody loss, or social ostracism (Nakamatsu, 2003; Stasiulis & Bakkan, 1997; Hiroo & Woo, 2009; Lee, 2020). This creates enormous power imbalances if they are in an abusive or unstable relationship. Despite these challenges, many migrant women are not passive victims. They actively seek support, organize themselves, or engage in local activism. In Japan, NGOs such as the Association of Foreign Wives of Japanese and *Kokusai Kekkon o Kangaeru Kai* advocate for legal reforms, provide translation services, and organize social events to combat isolation (Nakamatsu, 2003). In Korea, women's centers offer job training, legal counseling, and safe shelters, though access remains uneven depending on region and language support. Some women even become leaders within their communities, mediating conflicts, teaching language classes, or helping new arrivals navigate bureaucracy (Choi, 2021; Kim & Kilkey, 2018). These forms of agency, however, often remain under-recognized in official discourse, which continues to frame marriage migrants as dependents needing guidance rather than individuals with capacity for self-determination. The portrayal of foreign wives in the media has also evolved from depicting Vietnamese and Chinese brides as pitiable commodities to highlighting state integration efforts, yet stereotypes of docility and economic dependency

endure (Piper, 1997; Sadamatsu, 1996). Theoretical lenses of intersectionality, governmentality, and migration studies reveal how gender, class, ethnicity, and state power intersect in these unions, regulating intimate life through conditional citizenship, language tests, and cultural training (Crenshaw, 1991; Menjívar & Salcido, 2002; Foucault, 1984; Lan, 2019).

Unique challenges are encountered by children born into these marriages, who are referred to as "damunhwa" (multicultural) in Korea and "haafu" or "daburu" (half/double) in Japan, as they are situated within evolving discourses of multiculturalism (*damunhwajuui)*, national identity, and migration governance (Lan & Kim, 2024; Lee & Ko, 2021; Son et al., 2024). In Korea, their academic outcomes strongly correlate with maternal language proficiency and within-family social capital; lower achievement, struggles with self- and identity-related conflicts, bullying, and social exclusion are common, particularly in rural areas lacking multicultural curricula (Lee, Kim, & Kwon, 2018). In Japan, while the *daburu* label has become a more positive term, emphasizing beauty and cosmopolitanism, especially in media, children still face hierarchies based on which heritage language or culture is considered valuable, with English and Chinese being favored over others like Tagalog or Vietnamese. These mixed-heritage children often experience stigma related to their appearance, language, or family background. When foreign mothers lack fluency in Japanese or are excluded from school communities, children's academic and emotional development suffers (Shikita, 2014; Mukhina, 2013). The Japanese education system, which historically emphasized conformity, can be alienating to children perceived as "foreign," even if they are Japanese citizens by birth. Teachers' biases and peer stereotypes exacerbate alienation, though robust community support and proactive parental engagement can buffer risks, enabling children to act as cultural brokers who negotiate hybrid identities (Shikita, 2014; Mukhina, 2013; Choi, 2021).

Lan and Kim (2024) critique the top-down deployment of multiculturalism in East Asia as a state-led, instrumental project that reinforces existing power structures. Policies often aim not at celebrating diversity but at assimilating immigrant mothers and their children into dominant ethno-nationalist frameworks. These programs promote "reproductive assimilation" (Lan, 2019), where women are expected to rear culturally homogeneous children, often in line with the father's national identity. In Korea, for instance, state-run multicultural centers teach foreign mothers to cook Korean food, speak Korean, and perform

Korean mothering, reinforcing the patriarchal assumption that cultural legitimacy flows through the father and the nation-state (Kim, 2013; Lan & Kim, 2024). Lan and Kim (2024) also highlight the emerging trend of geopolitical multiculturalism, where governments portray second-generation children as cultural and linguistic bridges for foreign relations and regional soft power. They also emphasize the significance of transnationalism in shaping second-generation experiences. Unlike the Western model of immigration, where the sending and receiving countries are clearly distinct, Asian contexts often involve blurred or reversed flows. For instance, many Korean Vietnamese children move back to Vietnam with their mothers following marital breakdowns. These returnees struggle with legal ambiguity and poverty but also retain symbolic connections to South Korea, which caregivers view as a source of future opportunity (Kim, 2024).

The experiences of children born into these CBMFs, which extend far beyond the couple's initial union, exemplify the intergenerational consequences of marriage migration. In both South Korea and Japan, these children occupy a liminal space legally recognized yet often socially questioned. Their ability to thrive is shaped by a combination of family-level factors (such as maternal language proficiency and within-family bonding), institutional variables (like school inclusivity and teacher attitudes), and broader societal discourses on national belonging (Lee & Ko, 2021; Son et al., 2024). Son et al. (2024) found that children's bullying victimization increases acculturative stress among immigrant mothers in Korea, but this effect varies by the mother's country of origin. The association was significant only among Southeast Asian mothers, while Chinese and Japanese mothers showed no such relationship. The findings suggest that anti-bullying interventions should include support for immigrant mothers, particularly those from Southeast Asia who appear most vulnerable to secondary stress from their children's bullying experiences. The school environment, in particular, serves as a litmus test of integration. Research shows that these children often face peer exclusion, stereotype threat, and unequal access to educational resources, especially in schools lacking multicultural support systems (Lee, Kim, & Kwon, 2018). Teachers may hold implicit biases about the children's capabilities, and bullying remains a common experience, particularly for those whose appearance or surnames signal foreign heritage (Shikita, 2014). However, these outcomes are not uniform. Research has shown that children in communities with robust multicultural infrastructures, including language support programs, inclusive school curricula, and active parental involvement, exhibit superior academic performance, resilience, and social cohesion (Kim & Kilkey, 2018). In such cases, children often act as

"cultural brokers," translating for their mothers, negotiating local norms, and cultivating hybrid identities that bridge their parents' cultural worlds (Lan & Kim, 2024). Conversely, in less resourced or more conservative settings, children may internalize feelings of shame or displacement, leading to low self-esteem, academic disengagement, or social withdrawal. Using data from 5,147 multicultural families in Korea, Jang (2024) found that transnational grandparenting reduced depressive symptoms among multicultural children and adolescents, particularly for males in middle and high school. The findings highlight the mental health benefits of maintaining cross-border grandparent connections.

2.4 Beyond Asia: Alternative Models of CBM Migration

2.4.1 Mail-Order Brides and the Origin of Commercialized Marriage Migration

The "mail-order bride"s phenomenon has a rich and diverse history, shaped by global migration patterns, economic development, and changing gender norms (Robinson, 1996). Its origins can be traced back to the colonial era, when European powers like France and England facilitated the migration of women to their overseas colonies to address severe gender imbalances and stabilize settler societies (Zare & Mendoza, 2011). France sent the "filles du roi" to New France, Canada, providing dowries and state support to encourage their migration (Enss, 2005). For another instance, in the early 17th century in the United States, women who were referred to as "Jamestown brides" or "King's daughters" were recruited to marry male settlers. They were offered incentives such as land, inheritance rights, and the autonomy to select their husbands, which were frequently unavailable to women in their home countries (Epstein, 2009). Rather than being perceived as passive or powerless, these women were regarded as independent, resourceful, and respected, as they made deliberate decisions to improve their lives. In historical times, the term "mail-order bride" was rarely used to describe these women, as it is a modern construct (Simons, 1999). Rather, they were assigned titles that were indicative of their perceived dignity and significance in the formation of new societies (Epstein, 2009).

New forms of matchmaking emerged as the phenomenon evolved, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries. The "picture bride" system enabled women to marry men in distant lands through the exchange of photographs and correspondence (Enss, 2005). Modern communication technologies, particularly the internet, transformed the "mail-order bride" industry into a global enterprise (So, 2006). Women from Russia, the former Soviet Union,

China, Vietnam, the Philippines, and other regions were now connected with men from wealthier countries, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, through commercial agencies and online platforms (Epstein, 2008). These platforms enabled profile browsing, correspondence, and eventual in-person meetings, often culminating in marriage migration (Liu, 2015). The industry was characterized by a high degree of gender inequality, with men serving as paying customers and women's participation being typically free. This is indicative of broader global inequalities. Although some women perceive these marriages as a means of economic and social advancement, critics have emphasized the exploitative aspects of the industry, such as the commodification of women, the perpetuation of racial and gender stereotypes, and the facilitation of trafficking and abuse (Barry, 1995; Chang, 2002). The “mail-order bride” phenomenon has been subject to legislative scrutiny, with countries like the United States and the Philippines enacting laws to regulate the industry and protect women from exploitation (Lloyd, 2000). However, these measures have often proven inadequate, as the industry adapts to new legal environments and continues to thrive in the context of global economic disparities (Epstein, 2008).

The status of women within the mail-order bride system is complex and often ambivalent. On the one hand, women who engage in these arrangements may possess significant agency, as they pursue opportunities for personal autonomy, financial security, and upward mobility that may not be accessible in their home countries (Reynaud, 2010). However, the power dynamics that are inherent in these relationships, influenced by gender, economic status, and citizenship, can render women susceptible to social isolation, abuse, and exploitation (Barry, 1995; Chang, 2002). The industry has been criticized by social and legal commentators for fostering an environment in which domestic violence and control can thrive, as women may be reliant on their husbands for legal residency, financial support, and social integration (Epstein, 2008). The industry also perpetuates harmful stereotypes by depicting women from developing countries as submissive, exotic, or inherently suited for domestic roles, while positioning men from wealthier countries as rescuers or benefactors (Suzuki, 2011).

The experiences of children born to mail-order bride unions are less well-documented, but existing research suggests that their status is closely tied to the legal and social position of their mothers (Liu, 2015). In contexts where women are able to secure legal residency and

social acceptance, children may benefit from access to education, healthcare, and stable family environments (Hochschild, 2009). However, in cases where women remain undocumented or face discrimination, their children may also experience marginalization, limited access to services, and challenges related to identity and belonging (Epstein, 2008). The social perception of these children varies widely depending on the cultural context, the visibility of the family's origins, and prevailing attitudes toward mixed or transnational families (Wilk, 2017).

2.4.2 Marriage Migration Labels and European Transnational Families

From context to context, various marriage migration-related labels emphasize distinct aspects of regulation and mobility. International (or binational) marriages emphasize the legal frameworks of visas, family reunification, and stratified citizenship, as well as the nationalities of the partners. They emphasize the extent to which intimacy is regulated by state categories and class thresholds (Fresnoza-Flot & Ricordeau, 2017; Kofman, 2004). Cross-border (or cross-regional) marriages emphasize the politics and infrastructures of borders, whether they are Schengen's internal/external frontiers or East Asian corridors. This is achieved by connecting marriage to bordering practices, demographic anxieties, and policy instrumentality (Le Bail, 2023; Williams, 2010). Transnational marriages emphasize ongoing multi-sited kinship, care, and remittance practices beyond the initial move, recovering family agency under unequal regimes (Charsley, 2012; Constable, 2005). Intercultural/cross-cultural marriages focus on everyday negotiations of religion, language, and norms in mixed unions; in migration settings, evidence shows class and racialization often outweigh "culture" in shaping trajectories (Rodríguez-García, 2006). While these terms overlap, their analytical payoffs vary across regions. In Europe and North America, international/cross-border frames are entangled with "sham marriage" policing and income-conditioned rights, producing gendered and classed dependencies (Fresnoza-Flot & Ricordeau, 2017; Kofman, 2004). Transnational lenses cut across these settings by tracing how couples sustain obligations "here and there" despite conditional residence, brokerage, and surveillance (Charsley, 2012; Constable, 2005). Inter/cross-cultural framings remain useful when anchored in these structural dynamics rather than culturalist assumptions, keeping analyses attentive to power, class, gender, and race (Rodríguez-García, 2006).

Throughout Europe, transnational marriages have transitioned from a peripheral issue to a central concern for immigration policies, as marriage increasingly serves as a conduit for

mobility and a context in which integration, legality, and gendered expectations are negotiated, encompassing spatial hypergamy, broker-mediated arrangements, and limited agency. This literature emphasizes that marriage migration is not simply "secondary" to labor migration but co-constitutes transnational social spaces, with state scrutiny intensifying around cross-border family formation in contemporary Europe (Charsley, 2012).

In Germany and Austria, well-educated second-generation Turkish and Moroccan women frequently enter arranged unions with spouses from their parents' countries of origin. Studies in Germany highlight how well-educated second-generation women (of Turkish and Moroccan descent) and their partners negotiate boundaries of belonging, masculinity/femininity, and respectability under restrictive regimes, underscoring agency alongside constraint (Al-Rebholz & Apitzsch, 2021). Although these matches may be facilitated by family networks rather than romantic courtship, they afford brides German residency and economic security while reinforcing social hierarchies in their origin communities, where returnee husbands gain status (Charsley, Bolognani, & Spencer, 2016). Such "biographical policy evaluations" reveal how migrants and their families negotiate state-defined categories of "acceptable" marriage (Moret, Andrikopoulos, & Dahinden, 2019). Evidence on partner selection among the children of Turkish and Moroccan immigrants across six European countries indicates that transnational spouse choice is shaped by both individual and contextual factors: higher religiosity, rural origin, and more open family reunification policies are associated with a greater likelihood of choosing a partner from the parental country of origin. The findings also suggest that when other migration routes close, marriage remains a salient legal pathway, amplifying family expectations and transnational network pressures on spouse choice (Carol, Ersanilli, & Wagner, 2014).

In Southern Europe, rural bachelors in Italy and Spain have turned to mail-order bride services to marry women from Eastern Europe, especially Romania, Ukraine, and Poland, where skewed local sex ratios and poverty drive women to accept international matches. Brokers emphasize foreign brides' youth, domestic skills, and compliance, crafting narratives that appeal to men facing local marriage squeezes (Gaspar, 2009, 2012). Despite the transactional nature of these unions, family pressures often constrain women's consent, as decisions made under economic necessity intersect with patriarchal norms of kinship. In Poland, for instance, intercultural unions most commonly involve Polish citizens marrying partners from either neighboring Ukraine or, in the case of longer-standing communities,

Vietnam. After 2004, marriages between Polish men and Ukrainian women became prevalent in rural and small-town areas where local women had migrated to urban centers; these unions combine Ukrainian spouses' pursuit of economic security, gaining Polish residency and access to social benefits, with Polish men's need for partners in a local marriage market marked by female out-migration (Nowicka, 2015). Meanwhile, Poland's Vietnamese diaspora, originating from Cold War era student exchanges, has generated mixed marriages negotiated through community networks. Young Vietnamese spouses often internalize traditional Confucian family norms yet must renegotiate gender roles and domestic responsibilities under Polish family-reunification regulations (Hai, 2018). Vietnamese women married to Polish men report greater autonomy in child-rearing decisions compared to peers in Vietnam, alongside flexibility regarding marital expectations such as premarital cohabitation (Hai, 2018).

Scandinavian cases further illustrate how brokered unions serve both hypergamous and familial mobility goals: in Sweden and Finland, some rural men recruit Southeast Asian brides through matchmaking agencies promising domestic care and child-rearing support. While portrayed as consensual, these marriages involve significant informational asymmetries and legal vulnerabilities that limit brides' agency (Charsley et al., 2016). Moret et al. (2021) further demonstrate how prospective marriage migrants adapt state-imposed roles by constructing alternative social hierarchies that challenge labels of "forced," "sham," or "mixed" marriage.

Children from both Polish–Ukrainian and Polish–Vietnamese unions navigate hybrid identities in largely homogenous settings. When parents possess sufficient cultural and economic capital, these children perform at par with peers academically; nonetheless, they face social scrutiny and questions of belonging in communities unaccustomed to diversity (Nowicka, 2015). For child outcomes and identity, recent reviews of "transnational families" in Europe urge moving beyond dyadic frames to capture multi-sited networks and policy-mediated family life. This work situates children's identity formation within superdiverse contexts, where digital connectivity sustains cross-border kin ties and where school and welfare institutions mediate belonging, often unevenly across localities with limited prior diversity exposure (Budginaitė-Mačkinė, Albert, Schrooten, Stanojević, & Wojtyńska, 2025). They navigate complex identity formations underpinned by their parents' strategic negotiations. Research indicates that offspring of mixed-status couples often match or exceed

native peers in educational attainment when parents' socioeconomic resources are high, yet they encounter identity tensions and scrutiny in host communities unaccustomed to diversity (Milewski, 2010). In contexts where states deploy moralizing discourses labeling foreign brides as potential dependents or cultural threats, children become "ambassadors" of contested kinship models, negotiating belonging amid competing norms (Moret et al., 2021).

These European examples of forced-arranged, hypergamous, and brokered transnational marriages offer crucial comparative insights into their implications for children's integration and identity. They reveal how states' bordering practices and normative definitions of the "proper family" shape both adult and child lives, underscoring the global interplay between material constraints, symbolic categorization, and individual agency (Moret et al., 2021; Charsley et al., 2016).

Conclusion

This comparative analysis reveals that demographic imbalances across different regions have produced remarkably similar responses despite varying cultural contexts and state policies. From North India's CRMs to East Asian CBMs, from historical mail-order bride systems to contemporary European marriage migration, the fundamental dynamics remain consistent: gender imbalances create conditions where traditional marriage boundaries become permeable, forcing societies to develop new forms of family formation. The terminological analysis clarifies how different labels emphasize distinct analytical dimensions. Cross-regional and cross-border terms highlight spatial boundaries, international marriages emphasize legal frameworks, transnational marriages focus on ongoing multi-sited relationships, intercultural marriages center on cultural negotiations, and mail-order bride terminology captures commercial aspects. Understanding these distinctions is essential for developing precise analytical approaches. Despite variations in institutional arrangements, children born into these families face remarkably similar challenges across all contexts. They inherit the consequences of their parents' boundary-crossing unions while confronting questions about belonging and social positioning. Whether in rural Haryana, urban Hong Kong, multicultural Korea, or diverse European cities, these children must navigate multiple cultural frameworks without clear guidance. The chapter identifies critical gaps in understanding these children's experiences. While research documents discrimination and exclusion they face, systematic investigation of their psychological adjustment, educational outcomes, and identity formation remains limited. The absence of longitudinal data on their

transition to adulthood represents a significant empirical gap. The marriageability of children from these families emerges as a particularly important indicator across all contexts. How local communities respond to these children as potential marriage partners reveals whether demographic pressures are transforming social hierarchies or whether traditional practices remain resilient. This illuminates fundamental tensions between demographic necessity and cultural preservation.

Chapter 3: Weaving Numbers and Stories: A Mixed Methods Approach to Fieldwork

This chapter details the methodological framework designed to address three interconnected research questions examining CRMFs in rural North India[1]. The first question investigates the socio-economic conditions of these families to understand their positioning within the broader social and economic landscape. The second explores how various community stakeholders, including parents, locally elected leaders, community members, and government officials, evaluate the social standing and perceived marriageability of emerging adults from these families. The third examines how emerging adults themselves construct their sense of self and marriageability while navigating social interactions and available resources that shape their aspirations.

This doctoral dissertation implemented a mixed-methods approach that could capture both subjective experiences and structural patterns to comprehensively address these multi-layered questions. The quantitative component provided demographic and socio-economic mapping of 497 CRMFs across 52 villages, establishing the empirical foundation for understanding their social characteristics and material conditions. The qualitative component, consisting of 78 interviews with various stakeholders, revealed the meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences that animate these statistical patterns.

The chapter also presents the conceptual framework that emerged through iterative engagement with fieldwork data and methodological adaptations. Initial theoretical assumptions were continuously refined based on empirical findings, leading to modifications in both analytical approach and research design. The addition of new research participant categories, including CRMF parents, government officials and Sarpanches, necessitated adjustments to the original framework to better capture the multi-layered nature of social evaluation processes affecting CRMFs. These methodological changes, in turn, enhanced the conceptual understanding of how marriageability and social positioning operate across different stakeholder perspectives. Preliminary fieldwork demonstrated the inadequacy of single method approaches in documenting the complexity of CRM dynamics, which influenced the continual refinement of both research design and conceptual framework. The following sections detail how this mixed-methods framework was operationalized in the

[1] An earlier version of sections of this chapter was published as Ankit, "Navigating Methodological Shifts: A Reflexive Account of Researching Cross-Regional Families in Rural North India," *Ask: Research and Methods* 33, no. 1 (2024): 25-48, https://doi.org/10.18061/ask.v33i1.0002.

challenging terrain of rural Haryana, North India, while explaining how the conceptual framework evolved to accommodate new insights and methodological adaptations.

3.1 Primary Methodological Framework

This doctoral dissertation employed an embedded mixed-methods research design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010; Bergman, 2009). The design integrated quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, effectively balancing the strengths and limitations of each methodological approach to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the research problems that neither method could address independently (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007; Creswell, 2006). However, the project prioritized qualitative data, with quantitative data serving as a valuable supplement (Johnson et al., 2007). This approach aligned with Mason's (2006) two fundamental premises for mixed-methods research: first, that social experiences and lived realities are inherently multi-dimensional, requiring multiple perspectives for comprehensive understanding; second, that social life operates simultaneously at both macro and micro levels. The research utilized a concurrent embedded design, employing one dataset as a supplementary component within a study primarily focused on another data type (Creswell, 2003), recognizing that different research questions require diverse data types and that integration enhances understanding.

The theoretical foundation for mixed-methods research traces back to Campbell and Fiske's (1959) seminal work, which established that convergent results from various methods enhance validity assertions beyond the capabilities of individual methods, thereby minimizing methodological artifacts (Bouchard, 1976). This was further developed by Webb et al. (1966) and Denzin (1978), who advanced systematic methodologies for triangulation. Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989) later identified five purposes for mixed methods studies: triangulation for convergent validation; complementarity for elaboration and clarification; development where one method informs another; initiation for discovering paradoxes that reframe questions; and expansion for broadening inquiry scope through diverse methods.

Philosophically, this dissertation employed a pragmatic critical realist approach, integrating ontological and epistemological perspectives that acknowledge both socially constructed experiential understanding and an external, independent reality (Heeks et al., 2019; Archer et al., 2016). This framework, developed in sociology by Archer et al. (2016)

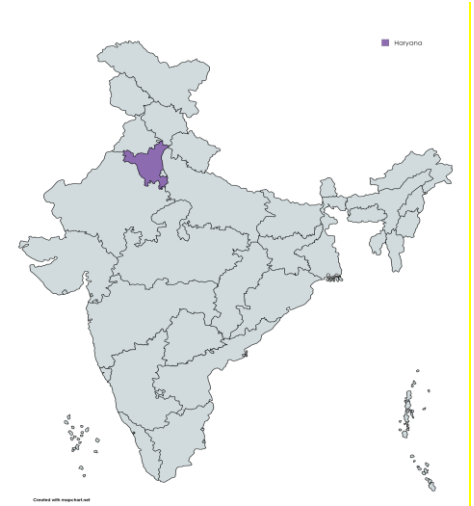
based on Bhaskar's (1978) original formulation, highlights the influence of various causal powers and their interactions on both quantitative patterns and qualitative experiences (Danermark et al., 2002; Iosifides, 2011). It produces knowledge by appreciating subjective accounts from social actors in particular contexts while acknowledging the independent structures that both limit and facilitate human agency (Sayer, 2010; Lawani, 2020). A pragmatic approach guided the selection of methods most appropriate for addressing the research questions (Creswell, 2017), recognizing that different methodologies can be strategically combined and adapted to investigate specific research problems (Creswell, Fetters, & Ivankova, 2004). This philosophy acknowledges that research requires objective distance at certain stages while demanding subjective engagement with participants at others, providing the epistemological foundation for integrating diverse methods and approaches while prioritizing research questions over paradigmatic purity in determining methodological choices (Biesta, 2010).

3.2 Research Locale: Narnaul Block, Mahendragarh District, Haryana

The scholarly literature on CRMs in North India has justifiably concentrated on Haryana, a state that has the highest prevalence of CRMs in the country and the lowest sex ratio (Kaur, 2004; Mishra, 2013; Mukherjee, 2013, 2015; Ahlawat, 2009, 2013). The state, located in the north of India, is bounded by Punjab to the west, Uttar Pradesh to the east, Rajasthan to the south, and Himachal Pradesh to the north, and it is surrounded by the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi on three sides (Figure 11).

Figure 11

***Map showing the* location of Haryana state within India**



Note. Created using MapMyChart (https://www.mapchart.net/india.html).

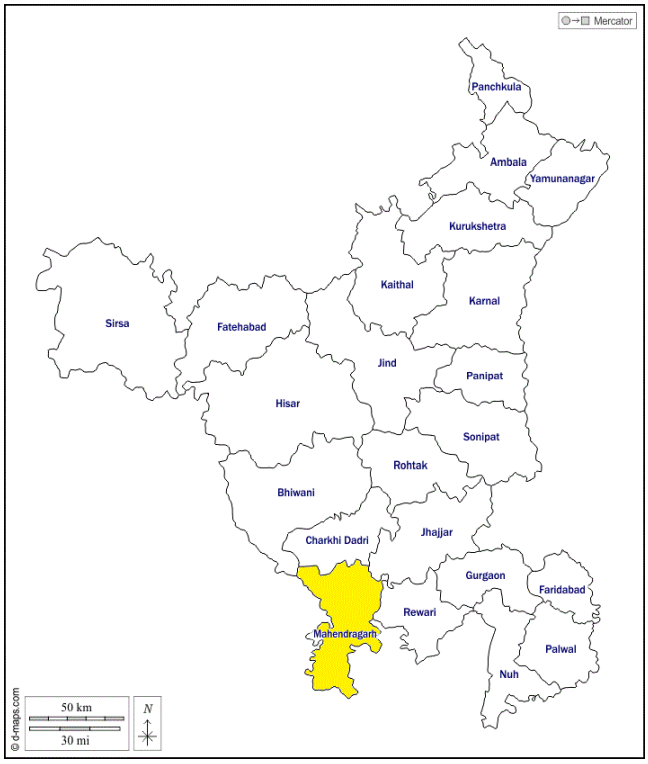
It is imperative to comprehend the unique attributes of rural North India in order to contextualize this dissertation. The region comprising Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan exhibits key characteristics: agrarian economies, village-centric social structures, and persistent traditional systems of caste, kinship, and patriarchy (Jodhka, 2012). The states maintain interconnections through enduring historical, linguistic, and cultural ties, which continue to exist despite the pressures of modernization. Village communities exhibit cohesive social structures in which family honor, social reputation, and communal ties significantly influence individual choices and mobility. The agricultural basis of these economies affects social organization, inheritance patterns, and gender roles, with marriage alliances functioning to consolidate family resources, uphold caste boundaries, and establish social status (Chowdhry, 1993; Jeffery & Jeffery, 1996).

The region's matrimonial landscape is dominated by Hindu marriage practices, which unite entire families rather than just individuals (Achari, n.d.). According to the 2011 Census, Hindus account for approximately 87% of Haryana's population, which significantly influences the state's family structures, social conventions, and marriage customs. This demographic reality establishes the cultural context in which CRMs emerge as both a necessity and an adaptation

Despite occupying only 1.3% of India’s geographical area, Haryana contributes 3.6% to national GDP (Sanyal & Arora, 2024) and maintains one of the country's highest per capita incomes. However, this economic prosperity coexists with acute social challenges, particularly gender disparities reflected in India's lowest sex ratio (879) and child sex ratio (834) according to the 2011 Census. These demographic imbalances have created conditions that drive CRM patterns across the state. While extensive research has examined CRMs in various Haryana districts, including Rohtak and Jind (Ahlawat, 2009, 2014), Kurukshetra (Larsen & Kaur, 2013), Sonipat and Hisar (Mishra, 2013), and border regions with Rajasthan (Kukreja & Kumar, 2013), Mahendragarh district has remained largely unexplored despite its significance (Figure 12).

Figure 12

Location of Mahendragarh District within Haryana



Note. Reprinted from Web India 123 (https://www.webindia123.com/Hariyana/LAND/distri.htm).

This research gap is particularly striking given that Mahendragarh not only exhibits the nation's most extreme child sex ratio but is also widely recognized as the birthplace of CRMs in Haryana. The severity of gender disparities in the district is evidenced by the country's steepest decline in child sex ratio between 2001 and 2011, which plummeted from 818 to 775.

Strategically located in southern Haryana approximately 120 kilometers from Delhi, Mahendragarh occupies a pivotal position at the intersection of Haryana and Rajasthan. The district borders Charkhi Dadri, Jhajjar, and Bhiwani to the north; Rewari and Rajasthan's Alwar district to the east; and extends to Rajasthan's Jaipur, Sikar, and Jhunjhunu districts to the south and west. Spanning 1,899 square kilometers, the district's terrain features distinctive sand dunes interspersed with low Aravalli hills. Mahendragarh maintains a predominantly rural character with 85.57% rural population, second only to Mewat district in Haryana, distributed across 375 villages (Census of India, 2011). This combination of extreme demographic imbalances, agrarian economy, and strategic geographic positioning makes the

district an exemplary case study for examining how economic transitions intersect with entrenched gender disparities to shape contemporary marriage practices in North India.

The district's demographic profile reveals significant disparities: male literacy reaches 89.72%, while female literacy remains at 64.57% (Table 5).

Table 4

Selected demographic indicators of Mahendragarh, Haryana, and India

Indicators	**India**	**Haryana**	**Mahendragarh**
Overall Sex Ratio	940	879	895
Child Sex Ratio (0-6 Y)	914	882	775
Percent of SC Population	16.6	20.2	17
Density of Population	382	573	486
Total Literacy	74.0%	75.6%	77.72%
Male Literacy	80.0%	84.0%	89.7%
Female Literacy	65.4%	65.9%	64.57%
Decadal Growth Rate	17.7%	19.9%	13.5%

Note: Census of India, 2011, published by the Registrar General of India.

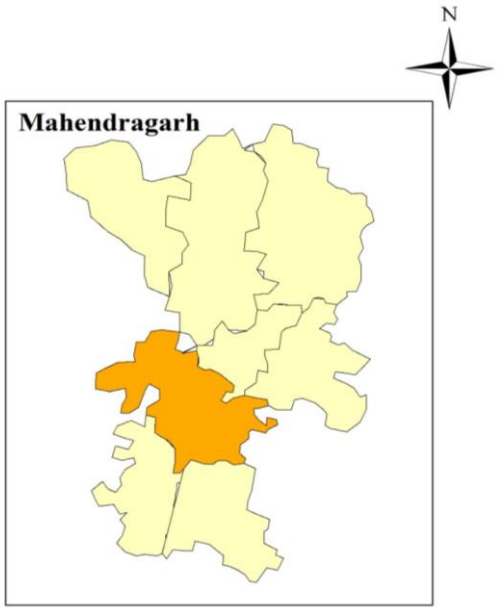
Muslims account for only 0.61% of the population, while Hindus make up 99.04%. Scheduled Castes make up about 17% of the population. The economic indicators indicate that Mahendragarh is facing developmental challenges. The per capita income of ₹1.38 lakh (2019-20) is significantly lower than the state average of ₹2.63 lakh in Haryana. This economic disadvantage challenges traditional beliefs regarding CRMs as “spatial hypergamy,” as evidenced by the migration of women to economically superior regions in East Asia (Kaur, 2004; Ankit, 2022). The district's incredibly low child sex ratio of 775 will

generate demographic pressures that exacerbate CRM patterns as these cohorts reach the age of marriage (Bose, 2021).

The social structure of the district illustrates the presence of caste hierarchies and dependencies on agriculture. The Ahirs are the predominant community in Mahendragarh, as well as in the adjacent districts of Rewari, Charkhi Dadri, and Gurgaon. Additional notable communities comprise Brahmans, Rajputs, Banias, Gujjars, Aroras, Khatris, Rahbaris, Balmikis, Chamars, Khanak, Kumhars, Khatis, Jats, and Lohars. The agricultural economy is primarily reliant on the Ahirs, Jats, Rajputs, Gujjars, and Brahmins. In contrast to Jats, who possess significant Khap Panchayats (traditional caste councils), Ahirs do not have comparable institutional frameworks (Singh, 1994). The absence is notable, as Khap Panchayats exert substantial influence over marriage decisions and family honor in Jat-dominated districts such as Rohtak, Sonipat, and Jind (Chowdhry, 2004; Kaur, 2010). Mahendragarh is organized into three subdivisions: Narnaul, Mahendragarh, and Kanina, along with eight Community Development Blocks. The Narnaul block, comprising 52 villages and centrally located, was selected as the primary research site for this study based on several methodological considerations: its representativeness of broader CRM dynamics, research accessibility and feasibility, and the unique convergence of multiple crisis factors that make it an ideal case for understanding contemporary marriage transformations. The block, overseen by a Block Development and Panchayat Officer (BDPO), functions as the block headquarters. Narnaul's economy is significantly reliant on agriculture, especially mustard cultivation, supported by robust road connectivity to major cities in Haryana and adjacent Rajasthan (Figure 13).

Figure 13

Map of Narnaul Block in Mahendragarh District



Note. Created using ArcGIS with administrative boundary data from the Survey of India and the Census of India, 2011.

The convergence of multiple crises in the Narnaul block has created distinctive marriage market dynamics that exemplify broader transformations in rural India, making it particularly suitable for addressing this study's research questions about how economic, environmental, and demographic factors intersect to reshape marriage practices. Economic distress is acute, with Haryana's unemployment rate reaching 37.4% by December 2023, the highest among Indian states (NSSO, 2023). This economic instability intersects with severe demographic imbalances, as Narnaul's sex ratio of 885 females per 1,000 males (Census of India, 2011) creates intensified competition for marriage partners.

Environmental degradation compounds these challenges significantly. Narnaul block’s villages experience extreme groundwater stress characterized by dangerous fluoride contamination, maximum in the district, alongside arsenic and chromium pollution (Yadav et al., 2019). The Central Ground Water Board (2024) has classified Mahendragarh district, particularly Narnaul block, as “over-exploited,” with groundwater development reaching 294% of sustainable levels. These environmental crises directly influence marriage negotiations and partner selection. Families increasingly decline to send daughters to water-stressed regions, anticipating compromised living conditions and uncertain futures. While

research specifically examining Narnaul remains limited, comparable patterns have emerged across India's water-scarce regions. Mehta and Karpouzoglou (2015) demonstrate how water scarcity fundamentally reshapes gender relations in semi-arid areas. Similar to Maharashtra's Marathwada region, where drought conditions have led to hurried "gate-cane" marriages timed with seasonal migration patterns (Subramanian, 2025), and the extreme case of Denganmal village where men marry multiple "water wives" whose sole purpose is fetching water from distant sources (Kaur, 2022), water scarcity in regions like Bundelkhand has created a phenomenon where parents explicitly refuse marriage proposals with "no water, no daughter," leaving men systematically rejected and forcing them to seek brides from other regions (Banerji, 2019). This comparative evidence demonstrates that environmental stress doesn't merely affect agricultural productivity but fundamentally reshapes marriage markets, family structures, and women's life trajectories across India's water-scarce regions. This intersection of environmental stress, demographic imbalance, and economic hardship has fundamentally altered Narnaul's marriage landscape, providing direct empirical grounds for examining how intersecting crises influence family formation strategies and gender relations. Local men, unable to secure brides within traditional kinship networks and regional boundaries, increasingly seek partners from economically disadvantaged areas where environmental challenges may appear less immediate or severe.

The selection of Narnaul block for this dissertation is thus methodologically robust on multiple grounds: it represents an understudied yet theoretically significant case where the historical birthplace of CRMs intersects with contemporary crisis conditions; it offers practical research accessibility while maintaining representativeness of broader rural North Indian marriage dynamics; and its unique combination of extreme demographic imbalances, environmental stress, and economic challenges provides an ideal analytical framework for understanding how multiple factors reshape traditional marriage practices. Unlike previously studied districts such as Rohtak, Jind, or Kurukshetra, which have been examined primarily through single-factor analyses (demographic or economic), Narnaul's multi-crisis context enables a more comprehensive understanding of the complex drivers behind contemporary CRM patterns.

3.3 Research Participants, Sampling, and Data Collection

This project identified and surveyed 497 CRMFs across all 52 villages of Narnaul block to gather comprehensive demographic and socio-economic data. While previous studies (Kaur,

2004; Mishra, 2013) have defined CRMs as unions crossing state or linguistic boundaries, this project operationalizes this concept using a 500-kilometer distance threshold to provide measurable criteria for identifying marriages that transcend traditional regional networks. The quantitative component employed systematic village-by-village surveys, collecting data from both male and female CRMF members to ensure internally consistent and coherent datasets (Roopa & Rani, 2012).

The survey instrument captured essential information including village location, contact details, ages of CRMF couples, CRMF mothers' native states, their communication patterns with natal families, educational attainment, occupations, number and ages of children, caste affiliation, participation in self-help groups (SHGs), and frequency of CRMF mothers' visits to their natal homes. A female field worker conducted this data collection over four months, visiting all 52 villages systematically. Her approach strategically engaged village Sarpanches to secure local leadership support while utilizing personal networks to facilitate access. This gender-sensitive strategy proved essential given cultural norms that restrict unfamiliar men from discussing household matters with women. The field worker's gender and regional experience enabled her to overcome access barriers and gather comprehensive data, though the process required more time than initially anticipated. CRMF mothers comprised the primary respondents, as they were typically available at home during data collection visits.

The qualitative component comprised 76 formal interviews supplemented by informal discussions with community members. The formal interviews included 21 in-depth interviews with Sarpanches, 17 in-depth interviews with CRMF emerging adults, 17 semi-structured interviews with CRMF mothers, 7 semi-structured interviews with CRMF husbands, and 14 semi-structured interviews with government officers. Additionally, I engaged in numerous informal conversations with community members during village visits, documented through field notes and observations rather than audio recordings.

3.3.1 CRMF Parents

Semi-structured interviews with CRMF parents followed a dual recruitment strategy. Initial contacts from the pilot study provided entry points into the community (Vogt, 1999), creating networks that facilitated additional connections. Subsequently, the quantitative survey data enabled purposive sampling to ensure caste and linguistic diversity. Participants who had been briefed during the survey phase and expressed willingness were contacted for interviews

(Bernard, 2002). Initial phone conversations explained research objectives and arranged meetings with both spouses. CRMF fathers frequently inquired about the number of interviews completed and research purposes. My local origins and village identity typically secured their cooperation, establishing me as an insider researcher rather than an external investigator. When phone contact proved impossible, village Sarpanches facilitated introductions and occasionally provided contextual background during interviews. Some interviews occurred at the *panchayat bhawan* (village common building) rather than private homes. The final sample included 17 CRMF mothers (see Appendix A) and 7 CRMF fathers (see Appendix B).

Interview protocols balanced predetermined questions with open-ended exploration, allowing participants to progress from generic responses to detailed narratives (Kvale, 1996; Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Brinkmann, 2014). I maintained minimal speaking time while actively listening, alternating between the interview guide and natural conversation flow (Xu, 2024). Follow-up questions deepened discussions, generating rich, contextualized data about lived experiences.

3.3.2 Community Members

Beyond formal interviews, I engaged in multiple informal discussions with community members encountered during village visits. These spontaneous conversations occurred in various settings, village *adda* (entry point), tea stalls, or village squares, revealing contextual details about community attitudes toward CRMFs. While not audio-recorded, these interactions were systematically documented through detailed field notes capturing key themes, observations, and direct quotes when possible. These informal exchanges often revealed candid perspectives that complemented formal interview data.

3.3.3 Government Officials

14 government officials, primarily from rural development and women and child development departments at block and district levels, participated in semi-structured interviews (see Appendix C). These officials were strategically included because they represent the institutional interface between policy formulation and ground-level implementation, directly shaping the lived experiences of CRMF and their emerging adults' marriage prospects. As frontline administrators, they possess unique perspectives on CRM

patterns while simultaneously influencing policy responses through their interpretations and implementation strategies.

Their inclusion offered critical perspectives on institutional awareness of CRM phenomena, revealing how bureaucratic understanding translates into policy formulations and program delivery. These officials occupy critical positions in rural governance, overseeing development schemes, social welfare programs, and administrative processes that directly impact CRMF integration into local communities. Understanding their perceptions proved essential for analyzing the institutional context within which CRMs operate and evolve.

The sample included both local officials familiar with regional dynamics and those transferred from other districts, creating a valuable comparative perspective on how administrative experience shapes understanding of local marriage patterns. Local officials brought deep contextual knowledge and long-term observational insights, while transferred officials offered external perspectives that highlighted distinctive features of Narnaul's marriage landscape. Direct office visits facilitated interview scheduling in private settings conducive to candid discussion about sensitive social dynamics. These interviews explored officials' professional experiences, institutional roles, and personal perspectives on CRMs and associated social transformations. Beyond formal discussions, conversations revealed how individual officials interpret and respond to CRMF-related challenges in their daily administrative work. Their questions and observations often provided valuable analytical insights that enhanced research findings while also illuminating the gap between policy intentions and ground-level realities.

3.3.4 Sarpanches

In-depth interviews with 21 Sarpanches represented a critical research phase for understanding community perspectives on CRMF emerging adults (see Appendix D). Contact information obtained from the Block Development and Panchayat Office enabled systematic outreach to all 52 Sarpanches, with the field worker having established prior connections. Data saturation became evident through repetitive responses after 21 interviews, leading to the conclusion of this phase. Some preferred telephone interviews given the topic's sensitivity, while others invited home visits to better understand research objectives. These interviews followed completion of CRMF couple and community member interviews to maximize contextual understanding.

The Sarpanch sample reflected institutional diversity: while traditionally male-dominated, reservation policies ensured 50% women's representation and Scheduled Caste (SC) inclusion. As elected leaders with extensive community knowledge, Sarpanches offered unique insights into CRMF dynamics, marriage patterns, and community attitudes. Their responsibilities, local governance, development works undertaken, and regular electoral engagements, position them as key informants on social change.

The in-depth interview format encouraged comprehensive exploration of perspectives on CRMF, CRMF emerging adults, evolving marriage norms, and leadership experiences (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Burgess, 1984). Initial phone conversations outlined interview purposes and questions, allowing preparation time. Interviews commenced with rapport-building pleasantries before seeking recording permission. I maintained eye contact while taking field notes, ensuring participants dominated conversation time. Key questions were repeated when initial responses lacked detail. Private home settings facilitated natural conversation flow. Interview outlines ensured comprehensive coverage while demonstrating genuine interest in participants as individuals (Thompson, 2000). Most interviews lasted approximately ninety minutes, concluding with general questions about broader opinions. All interviews were recorded with explicit permission to ensure data accuracy and completeness.

3.3.5 CRMF Emerging Adults

The survey identified 25 CRMF emerging adults (ages 18-25) among the 497 families. This demographic represents a distinctive developmental stage characterized by identity exploration, self-focus, instability, feeling “in-between,” and sensing possibilities (Arnett, 2000). Young people in this phase explore various life experiences before committing to long-term adult roles and relationships. They perceive themselves as transitioning toward adulthood, but not fully achieving adult status yet (Arnett, 2003; Mayseless & Scharf, 2003; Nelson et al., 2004).

Recent research by Mitra and Arnett (2025) provides compelling evidence for the applicability of emerging adulthood theory to Indian contexts. Their study of 342 Indian participants found that most respondents endorsed the characteristics of emerging adulthood as representative of their current life phase, with self-focus rated highest, followed by possibilities, identity exploration, feeling in-between, and instability. Importantly, their research identified four distinct profiles within Indian emerging adults as “stall,” “moderate,” “transitional time/relational,” and “transitional time/self-focus,” demonstrating the

heterogeneous nature of this developmental period in India. Seiter's (2009) earlier work in Tamil Nadu similarly found that while the majority of Indian young people felt they had achieved adulthood, significant variations existed based on gender, student status, and engagement positions. Her findings revealed that Indian emerging adults emphasized family capacities and relational maturity as criteria for adulthood, reflecting collectivistic cultural values, while students showed significantly higher optimism about their futures compared to non-students. These studies validate the analytical value of emerging adulthood frameworks in Indian contexts, though with culturally specific manifestations. For CRMF emerging adults in rural Haryana, this period often marks initial departure from villages for education or employment, initiating identity exploration and self-discovery. They navigate tensions between traditional expectations, particularly early marriage pressure for young women, and personal aspirations for education and careers. The instability characteristic of emerging adulthood manifests in their struggle to reconcile CRMF family values with broader societal norms. While remaining financially dependent on parents, they experience newfound freedoms and responsibilities, perceiving themselves as occupying liminal space between childhood and full adulthood. Many express optimisms about future possibilities despite rural origins and family circumstances, echoing Mitra and Arnett's (2025) findings about the “possibilities” dimension being highly endorsed among Indian emerging adults.

Ultimately, I interviewed 17 CRMF emerging adults (see Table 20). Family presence during interviews significantly influenced conversational dynamics, requiring question modifications and affecting response depth. Participants are likely self-censored on sensitive topics, providing socially desirable responses conforming to family expectations. Family interjections occasionally disrupted interview flow and influenced discussion direction, with relatives offering corrections or alternative perspectives that potentially skewed data capture. This environment constrained exploration of personal experiences and emotions. Despite these limitations, I employed strategies to deepen engagement. Gradual progression from casual to substantive topics, open questioning techniques, demonstrated interest, and active encouragement helped participants understand their role involved in detailed narration rather than brief responses (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). The in-depth format provided flexibility to ensure key topic coverage despite environmental constraints. However, the lack of complete privacy undoubtedly affected response authenticity and depth, illustrating the methodological value of securing private interview settings when researching sensitive family dynamics.

Having established the demographic profile of the research participants, I now turn to the conceptual framework that guides this project's analysis. This sequencing reflects the adaptive methodological approach where conceptual framework was refined through engagement with participants, ensuring that analytical tools emerge from rather than preceded understanding of their concrete experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

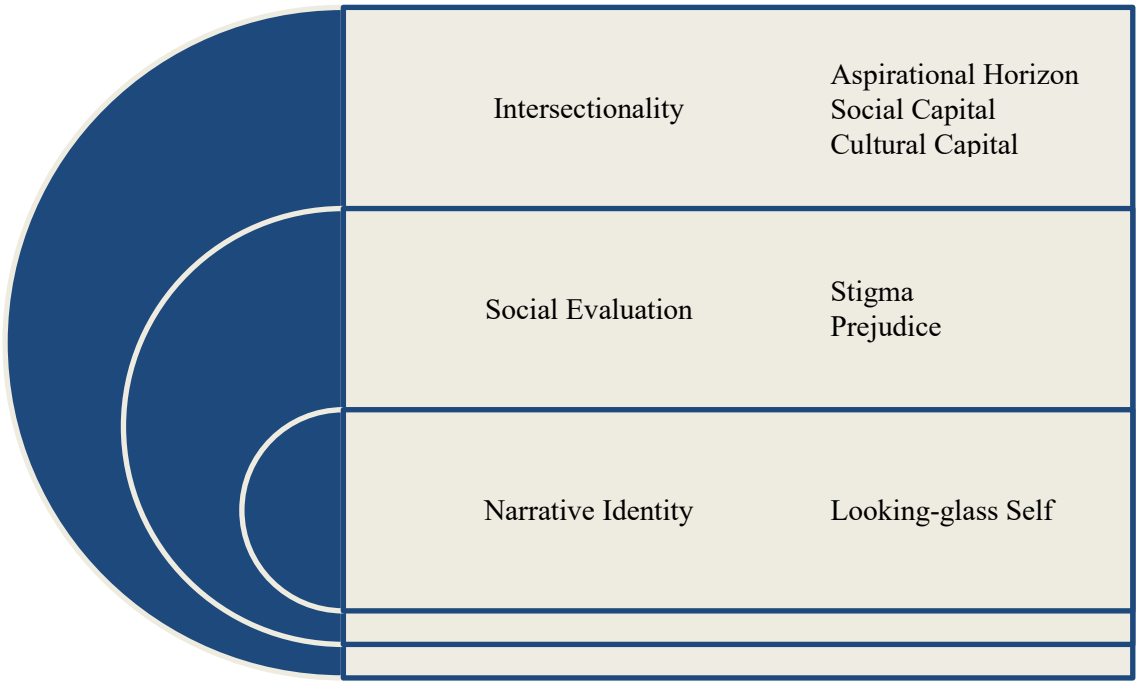
3.4 Conceptual Framework

Conceptual frameworks fundamentally shape research inquiry by influencing question formulation, guiding data collection and analysis, and informing actionable outcomes (Cresswell, 2009; Ravitch & Riggan, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Building on this foundation, this project employs multiple interconnected conceptual elements organized across several analytical layers to address three primary research questions.

To ensure conceptual coherence and proper alignment of research design elements, I have further developed a one-page graphical model that visualizes the key conceptual components and their relationships (Crawford, 2020; see Figure 14). Rather than suggesting rigid hierarchical structures, this conceptual map illustrates how these elements function as an interconnected, multi-layered system that collectively informs the research approach.

Figure 14

Conceptual Framework



Note: Figure created using Microsoft PowerPoint.

The conceptual framework in Figure 14 integrates several established concepts that I apply to analyze CRMFs. Table 4 details these concepts, their scholarly foundations, key proponents, and how they correspond to the research questions and chapter structure.

Table 5

Overview of Concepts, Research Questions, and Chapters

Theoretical Concept	**Key Proponents**	**Contemporary Researcher(s)**	**For Research Question(s)**	**In Chapter(s)**
Narrative Identity	McAdams (1985, 2001)	McAdams & McLean, 2013	RQ3	Chapter 6

Looking-Glass Self	Cooley (1902)	Franks & Gecas (1992)	RQ 3	Chapter 6
Social Evaluation	Lamont (2012)	Lamont (2012)	RQ2	Chapter 5
Stigma	Goffman (1963)	Link & Phelan (2001); Chaudoir et al. (2013)	RQ 3	Chapter 6
Prejudice	Allport (1954)	Tajfel & Turner (1986)	RQs 1 and 2	Chapters 4 and 5
Social Capital	Bourdieu (1986)	Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998)	RQs 1 and 3	Chapters 4 and 6
Cultural Capital	Bourdieu & Passeron (1977)	Lamont & Lareau (1998)	RQs 1 and 3	Chapters 4 and 6
Aspirational Horizon	Arjun Appadurai (2004)	Arjun Appadurai (2004)	RQ 3	Chapter 6
Intersectionality	Crenshaw (1989)	Arya & Rathore (2019)	RQs 1, 2, and 3	Chapters 4, 5, and 6

2.5.1 Narrative Identity

At the core of this framework lies the concept of narrative identity, defined as the internalized and evolving story that individuals construct about themselves to make sense of their lives (McAdams, 1985, 2001, 2011, 2013). McAdams (2013) conceptualizes narrative identity not merely as a static self-concept but as a dynamic life story, a personal narrative that individuals craft to understand who they are, where they come from, and where they are

going. Given the centrality of marriage in the socio-cultural context of this dissertation's emerging adult participants, I argue that their narrative identities become fundamentally structured around their perceived marriageability. Their sense of self and imagined future are shaped by how they and others view their marriageability. Experiences from the surrounding layers of this conceptual framework continuously influence and give meaning to their narrative identities.

This doctoral dissertation extends the application of narrative identity beyond emerging adults to examine how CRMF mothers and Sarpanches also construct coherent life stories that shape their social evaluations and community interactions. CRMF mothers develop narrative identities that help them make sense of their CRM experiences, their integration into new communities, and their children's future prospects. These maternal narratives often center around themes of sacrifice, adaptation, and hope for their children's acceptance. Similarly, Sarpanches construct narrative identities as community leaders that position them as both guardians of tradition and pragmatic problem-solvers navigating social change. Their personal stories about effective leadership directly influence how they evaluate CRMFs and communicate social expectations to community members.

This multi-generational approach to narrative identity reveals how different actors within the same social system construct meaning-making stories that intersect and influence each other. The concept particularly addresses Research Question 3 and supports Research Question 2. Positioning narrative identity at the framework's core allows this project to view participants not merely as subjects shaped by structural forces, but as active storytellers engaged in making meaning of their lives across different generational and social positions (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

2.5.2 Looking-Glass Self and Social Evaluation

I primarily draw on Cooley's (1902) looking-glass self, supplemented by Franks and Gecas's (1992) extended interpretations, to examine how emerging adults from CRMFs form, internalize, and navigate their self-concept and perceived marriageability. These interpretations demonstrate that self-identity is intrinsically social, shaped by interactions with both close relationships and broader societal norms. Cooley (1902) is recognized as the first interactionist sociologist to propose that the self is inextricably linked to social life and requires reference to others. He argues that our self-perceptions are shaped by how others

perceive us, a process beginning in early childhood. The “looking-glass self,” a self-image based on beliefs about others’ perceptions, frequently leads to the internalization of these perceived judgments (Macionis, 2002). This self-concept comprises three fundamental elements: our perception of how we appear to others, our perception of their evaluation of that appearance, and a corresponding emotion such as pride or shame (Cooley, 1902, p. 184). The anticipated judgment in the second stage serves as the precursor to feelings of pride or shame, with the character and influence of the other person shaping one’s emotional response. The looking-glass self operates primarily within primary groups characterized by direct interaction and collaboration, family units, children’s playgroups, and community elder groups, which Cooley designates as “the nursery of human nature” (Jandy, 1942; Wiley, 2011). Franks and Gecas (1992) argue that Cooley’s self-concept rests on four fundamental concepts. First, we consider how others see us and learn to distinguish between their actual behaviors and our imagined interpretations before these affect our self-view. Second, we attend only to reactions that feel significant within our social circle. Third, we maintain consistent personal values that shield us from external judgments. Finally, we form a self-image that, while shaped by others, remains independent because we trust our sense of effectiveness. They contend that modern social psychology neglects Cooley’s final two qualifications and that he underemphasizes the self’s autonomous dimension (Franks & Gecas, 1992). To address this gap, they incorporate Mead’s (1934) “generalized other,” the organized community whose collective attitudes forge self-unity, and emphasize the reflexive act of “taking the role of the other,” through which individuals internalize societal norms (Dodds et al., 1997). In this framework, the generalized other functions as a diffuse social agent, shaping thought and behavior and exerting control beyond any single interpersonal relationship.

In Chapter Six, I integrate Cooley’s looking-glass self, Mead’s generalized other, and Franks and Gecas's refinements to examine how emerging adults from CRMFs form, internalize, and navigate their self-concepts by positioning their immediate social interactions alongside broader societal norms and expectations. I trace how they adopt others’ appraisals, both affirming and stereotypical, and how these internalized judgments shape their coping mechanisms and future strategies. How others perceive them, and how they internalize these judgments, proves foundational.

To deepen this analysis, Chapter Five integrates Lamont's (2012) concept of social evaluation, which posits that individuals' self-concepts are filtered through others' judgments, thereby structuring patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and status hierarchies. Lamont defines social evaluation as the process through which community actors, parents, Sarpanches, and government officials, deploy moral, cultural, and social criteria to classify and assign worth. I apply this lens to examine how community actors in CRM settings articulate criteria for judging children from such unions and how they navigate these evaluative practices to defend their children's belonging or, conversely, to marginalize them. By linking negative evaluations to constrained marriageability and reduced social standing, and by highlighting instances where positive assessments facilitate inclusion, I demonstrate that social evaluation serves as a foundational mechanism shaping emerging adults' self-concepts, coping strategies, and envisioned futures.

While the looking-glass self (Cooley, 1902) provides foundational understanding of how emerging adults form their self-concept in relation to others' perceptions and treatment, and Lamont's (2012) theory of social evaluation illuminates the broader mechanisms through which communities morally assess and categorize individuals, this project also engages with the layered dynamics of stigma and prejudice as experienced by these emerging adults.

2.5.3 Stigma and Prejudice

I draw on Goffman's (1963) definition of stigma, Link and Phelan's (2001) framework, and Chaudoir et al.'s (2013) exploration of self-stigma. Goffman (1963) defines stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (p. 3), noting that stigmatized individuals are compared to those considered normal. Initial perceptions classify social identities, including social status and individual characteristics, creating a "virtual social identity" that may contrast with one's "actual social identity" (Goffman, 1963). When evidence shows they differ from others in their assumed category, this individual is "reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). The stigma experience depends on whether the stigmatized characteristic can be concealed (Goffman, 1963).

Link and Phelan (2001) contend that numerous social scientists have examined stigma using theories that are not aligned with the lived experiences of stigmatized groups, resulting in misconceptions. Stigma is defined as a set of interconnected concepts that arise when labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination coalesce within a power

dynamic that permits their occurrence (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 377). Stigmatization is characterized as a four-part process: initially, individuals assign labels to human differences, although the validity of these labels is often uncertain. Secondly, prevailing cultural beliefs associate labeled individuals with negative stereotypes. Third, individuals who are labeled are classified as "them," which facilitates stereotyping by highlighting differences. Fourth, individuals who are labeled experience a decline in status and discrimination, which impacts their worldview and results in devaluation, rejection, and exclusion. This process adversely affects life chances, encompassing income, education, psychological well-being, housing, medical treatment, and additional outcomes (Link & Phelan, 2001, pp. 373-74). They contend that stigmatized individuals actively utilize available resources to counteract the stigmatizing tendencies of more powerful groups, with their stigmatization being influenced by their relative power in comparison to the stigmatizer (Markowitz & Engelman, 2017; Link & Phelan, 2001).

For Chaudoir et al. (2013), self-stigma involves how individuals respond to their stigmatized status within broader social contexts and appears in three primary beliefs: anticipated stigma, the expectation or fear of stigma, linked to poorer health and increased psychological distress; enacted stigma, actual experiences of stereotyping, often leading to reduced self-expression, social isolation, and less support; and internalized stigma, where individuals absorb negative societal attitudes, often resulting in lower self-esteem, especially among those with concealable stigmas (Earnshaw & Chaudoir, 2009). Their skin tone, language accent, or maternal lineage become everyday markers of difference, surfacing in school nicknames, peer jokes, or judgmental remarks from relatives and community members (Kukreja, 2021).

This framework enables key questions: How do emerging adults interpret the emotional and social consequences of negative evaluations, such as symbolic exclusion and reduced perceived marriageability, or resist these judgments? Do these evaluations lead individuals to engage in resistance, recalibrate their aspirations, or pursue altered goals? Do they desire local marriages? I examine how these individuals internalize societal stigma and its impact on their psychological and social well-being. Chapter Six elaborates on this analysis.

To understand how group dynamics, self-categorization, and societal biases contribute to prejudiced attitudes and behaviors, I draw on Allport's (1954) concept of prejudice and Tajfel

and Turner's (1986) social identity theory. Allport (1954) characterized prejudice by inaccurate beliefs, likely resulting from overgeneralization based on limited observations. Prejudice can be felt or expressed and may target a group as a whole or an individual due to their group membership (Allport, 1954, p. 9). Allport believed that hostility was a natural human capacity and that individuals formed categories and generalizations about ethnic groups that oversimplified lived experience (Katz, 1991). He also believed it was much easier to increase prejudice than to reduce it (Katz, 1991). Tajfel and Turner (1986) claim that social groups aid in relational and comparative identification (p. 283) and that social groups seek differentiation as a result of pressure to positively assess their own group through in-group/out-group comparisons (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, 1975). "A person's self-image that derives from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging" is how they describe social identity (p. 283). In social settings, belonging to a group becomes a part of one's self-concept. Value conflicts are lessened by increased discrimination when supremacy is guaranteed but less when it is uncertain. This differentiation aims to preserve or attain superiority over an outgroup on specific dimensions (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, pp. 284-85).

In rural North India, prejudice frequently targets CRMF mothers who are distinguished by caste, regional, and linguistic differences. This prejudice becomes intergenerationally transmitted to their children, who are often labeled as "impure," "not fully local," or "mixed" (Kukreja, 2019, 2021). Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory proves essential for understanding this dynamic: it illuminates how in-group (dominant caste/local) and out-group (cross-regional/low caste) distinctions are sustained, creating symbolic boundaries that marginalize emerging adults based on their maternal heritage. The integration of social identity theory with Allport's concept of prejudice provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing how group dynamics and self-categorization foster prejudiced attitudes toward these emerging adults. Chapters Five and Six develop this analysis in detail.

2.5.4 Social and Cultural Capitals

I draw on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" and Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) three-dimensional framework—structural, cognitive, and relational—to examine the social networks and capital available to CR—structural, cognitive, and

relational—in marriage arrangement processes and broader social positioning. CRMFs often face challenges in accessing local networks due to their outsider status, making their social capital particularly significant for understanding their integration and opportunities within rural communities.

I also incorporate Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) and Lamont and Lareau's (1988) concepts of cultural capital to explain how education and cultural knowledge affect emerging adults' opportunities and social standing. Cultural capital, the knowledge, skills, and behaviors individuals acquire from their social group, can serve as criteria for inclusion or exclusion from employment opportunities, resources, and prestigious groups (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Dominant classes use this cultural capital to signal distinction and maintain social distance, while subordinate groups often lack access to these high-status cultural signals (Bourdieu, 1986).

These frameworks illuminate how social and cultural capital intersect to shape family-level disparities in opportunity, particularly relevant to Research Question 1 and explored in Chapter Four. They also enhance our understanding of how community members evaluate the marriageability and social worth of emerging adults, which is central to Research Question 2 and detailed in Chapter Five. Additionally, they reveal how these young people perceive their position and future aspirations within their social context, addressing Research Question 3 as analyzed in Chapter Six.

2.5.5 Aspirational Horizon

Arjun Appadurai's (2004) concept of aspirational horizon provides a powerful framework for understanding how individuals imagine their futures in relation to socio-economic constraints and possibilities. Appadurai (2004) argues that aspirations are not merely private desires but are shaped by cultural norms, social structures, and collective experiences. He contends that poor and marginalized groups often experience a "capacity to aspire" deficit, not because they lack desires or ambitions, but because they lack the social and cultural capital needed to navigate institutional pathways toward realizing those aspirations. This framework proves especially relevant for understanding emerging adults in CRMFs; their aspirational horizons and what they imagine as possible, or desirable, are shaped by structural inequalities and everyday social interactions that either support or limit their capacity to aspire. This concept applies most directly to Research Question 3. It also offers interpretive value for Research Question 1 by explaining why certain families demonstrate greater aspirational capacity than

others, depending on their network embeddedness and access to CRMFs, or material resources.

2.5.6 Intersectionality

Intersectionality, another overarching concept for this project, provides a crucial analytical lens for examining the layered disadvantages experienced by emerging adults in CRMFs. Originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to describe the dual discrimination facing Black women, the concept has evolved to incorporate overlapping identities such as gender, caste, race, class, and disability, demonstrating how these identities intersect to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. It entered Indian feminist discourse through Dalit feminist thought, which conceptualizes caste and gender as mutually constitutive axes of marginality (Paik, 2014). However, its applicability remains contested. Critics argue that intersectionality redundantly restates earlier Indian concepts and risks fragmenting feminist solidarity (Menon, 2015; Tharu & Niranjana, 2020; Shah & Lerche, 2017). Conversely, Dalit feminist scholars defend intersectionality as indispensable for authentic Indian feminism, emphasizing Dalit women's "triple burden" of caste oppression, class exploitation, and patriarchal domination while critiquing *Savarna* (upper caste) feminism for neglecting caste dynamics (Arya, 2020).

CRMs introduce women into new regions where they are considered outsiders based on linguistic, regional, or caste differences (Kukreja & Kumar, 2013). Their children inherit a "mixed" status, subjecting them to symbolic exclusion and social evaluation that cannot be explained by single-axis categories like caste or class alone. Intersectionality enables deeper analysis of how emerging adults from such families perceive their sense of self and future prospects as young people whose life trajectories are shaped by interlocking structural constraints. This framework applies across all research questions: Research Question 1 reveals how these families' socio-economic characteristics reflect layered disadvantages; Research Question 2 examines how overlapping identities shape community perceptions; and Research Question 3 explores how gender, caste, and family background interact to influence emerging adults' experiences of marriageability and belonging. Although this concept appears as the outermost layer in the conceptual framework, it permeates all other layers, shaping how emerging adults experience social evaluation, stigma, access to capital, and aspirational horizons. It, thus, functions as both context and active force in constructing narrative identity and marriageability.

3.5 Data Analysis

The analysis of quantitative data utilized descriptive statistics to delineate the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the 497 CRMF households. The analysis comprised frequency distributions, measures of central tendency (mean and median), and measures of dispersion (range and standard deviation) to contextualize the qualitative findings (Thompson et al., 1996). Fifteen cases of deceased husbands were excluded from the analyses at the couple level. Inferential statistics encompassed ANOVA, paired t-tests, Pearson correlations, chi-square tests, and multiple regression analyses, with significance levels established at $p < 0.05$ (Blaikie, 2003). These analyses, detailed in Chapter 4, were conducted post-hoc to explore emergent patterns in the data. All statistical analyses were performed using JASP.

The interview transcription process started with Microsoft Hindi Transcriber, but the initial outputs needed significant editing. I systematically reviewed all transcripts against audio recordings to ensure accuracy before conducting thematic analysis (Charmaz, 2003; Saldaña, 2016). The analysis prioritized factual content and substantive meanings rather than linguistic or expressive features (Silverman, 2004).

The coding process followed Saldaña's (2016) two-cycle method. First-cycle coding combined in vivo and descriptive approaches, with in vivo coding predominating to preserve participants' own terminology and meanings (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss, 1987). Descriptive codes summarized key topics in short phrases (Tesch, 1990). Second-cycle pattern coding consolidated initial codes into broader themes and analytical categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Coding was conducted iteratively after every few interviews to identify emerging patterns and determine saturation. Thematic saturation became evident after approximately 24 interviews with CRMF couples and 21 with Sarpanches. The 14 government officers represented available participants from departments directly engaged with CRMF issues, while 17 emerging adults constituted the maximum achievable sample from the 25 identified. CRMF husband and community member interviews underwent manual coding due to their intermittent collection. The remaining interviews were analyzed using Atlas.ti software. Direct quotations from participants substantiate analytical claims throughout the findings, maintaining voice and authenticity.

3.4.1 Integration of Methods

The quantitative and qualitative strands proceeded concurrently, with survey analysis occurring alongside ongoing interviews. Integration occurred during the analysis phase, where quantitative patterns and qualitative themes were woven together within analytical categories (Bryman, 1998, 2004; Fielding & Schreier, 2001; Kelle, 2001). The datasets demonstrated convergence rather than contradiction, though divergent perspectives between participant groups (such as Sarpanches and CRMF couples) are addressed in the analysis. This synthesis of quantitative breadth and qualitative depth enabled nuanced understanding of how demographic patterns intersect with lived experiences, producing robust conclusions about CRMF experiences in rural Haryana.

3.6 Evolution from Pilot Study

This dissertation evolved from a qualitative pilot study that was exclusively based on an interpretivist framework to a mixed-methods approach grounded in pragmatism. This transition significantly enhanced my understanding of CRMFs in rural North India. The pilot study, conducted between July and September 2022, was initially driven by existing inquiries into CRMF children's education, employment, identity formation, and stigma in CRMs, questions that had been raised primarily by Kaur (2004), Mishra (2013), Chaudhry (2016), and Kukreja (2021). I have documented the complete methodological journey in a paper published in the journal, *Ask: Research and Methods* (Ankit, 2024).

Initially, I adopted Fritz Schütze's biographical narrative interview method to allow emerging adults (ages 18-25) to recount their life histories in their own words (Schütze, 1976, 1983; Rosenthal, 2004). This approach aligns with established biographical research traditions that emphasize the importance of allowing participants to construct their own narrative structures and temporal sequences (Wengraf, 2001; Chamberlayne et al., 2000). Biographical narrative methods have been increasingly recognized in Indian social research for their capacity to capture the intersection of personal agency and structural constraints, particularly in studies of marginalized communities (Riessman, 2008). I assumed that open-ended prompts would elicit rich, longitudinal accounts of family dynamics, caste stigma, and identity negotiation, following the principle that individuals are the best interpreters of their own life experiences (Apitzsch & Siouti, 2007).

However, this approach quickly revealed its limitations in the rural Haryana context. The participant recruitment relied on snowball sampling through personal networks (Atkinson & Flint, 2001), yielding connections to roughly 15–20 CRMFs per village but only six eligible CRMF emerging adults. Despite my insider status and fluency in the local Haryanvi dialect, which eased initial access and helped establish rapport with participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), the biographical narrative method struggled to capture the complex realities these young people faced.

In practice, several challenges emerged that necessitated a fundamental rethinking of my approach. Every interview took place in the participant's home, with parents or elders invariably present, a reality that shaped both the content and dynamics of our conversations. This finding resonates with Narayan's (1993) observations about the inherently social nature of storytelling in Indian contexts, where individual narratives are often co-constructed within family frameworks. The absence of private spaces and the curiosity of neighbors meant that emerging adults hesitated to speak openly about sensitive topics, consistent with research on privacy constraints in rural Indian households (Jeffrey et al., 2008). They repeatedly requested interviewer prompts, undermining the spontaneous narrative flow central to biographical methods (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). More significantly, these young participants, whose life experiences remained rooted in dependent family and educational environments, found it difficult to construct autonomous life stories. This challenge reflects broader critiques of Western-derived narrative methods when applied to collectivistic cultural contexts where individual agency operates within tightly woven familial structures (Clandinin, 2006; Riessman & Speedy, 2007). By the fourth interview, it became clear that the purely qualitative approach failed to reveal how personal agency intersected with broader demographic and socio-economic forces.

These realizations from the pilot study directly informed my transition to a concurrent embedded mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The quantitative survey component, which was absent in the pilot, now provided systematic data on all 497 cross-regional families across the 52 villages of Narnaul block. This gave me the structural foundation that the narrative interviews had lacked, addressing what Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) identify as the limitation of purely qualitative approaches in capturing population-level patterns. The employment of a female fieldworker addressed the gender-related access constraints I had encountered, particularly when approaching households where women were

the primary respondents, following established protocols for gender-sensitive research in Indian rural contexts (Dube, 1997). The shift from biographical narratives to semi-structured and in-depth interviews allowed me to work within the cultural reality of family participation while still exploring key themes, adapting methodological approaches to local social realities rather than imposing external frameworks (Berreman, 1962; Srinivas, 1996).

The pilot study, despite its limitations, was invaluable in teaching me that understanding CRMs requires both the breadth of survey data and the depth of personal narratives, woven together to capture the full complexity of these families' lives, echoing calls for methodological pluralism in Indian social research (Uberoi, 2000; Deshpande, 2004).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This dissertation followed the general principles and research ethics outlined in the Code of Ethics document prepared by the Indian Sociological Society (ISS) as well as the 2012 Sociologists' Code of Ethics document adopted by the General Assembly of Delegates of the Polish Sociological Association (PTS).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasize that ethical considerations must be continuously negotiated throughout the entire research process rather than treated as a one-time procedural requirement. While institutional ethical review processes often present ethics as a static checklist requiring initial approval, the reality of fieldwork reveals that ethical dilemmas emerge, evolve, and require ongoing reflection as research unfolds. Ethical considerations shift dynamically as researchers encounter unexpected situations, develop deeper relationships with participants, and negotiate the complicated realities of data collection and analysis. This understanding proved particularly relevant in my study of CRMFs, where the sensitive nature of the topic and the intimate family settings required constant ethical vigilance. Rather than viewing ethics as a preliminary hurdle to overcome, I approached ethical decision-making as an integral component of methodological rigor. The following discussion examines how ethical considerations manifested across three distinct phases of the research process: pre-interview preparation, interview conduct, and post-interview responsibilities.

In the quantitative part of the study, ethical considerations were also paramount. Ensuring the ethical integrity of the survey process was crucial, just as it was for the qualitative interviews. As Israel and Hay (2006) emphasize, ethical principles apply equally

across all research methodologies, requiring researchers to maintain consistent standards of participant protection regardless of data collection methods. The principle of methodological neutrality in ethics, as outlined by Christians (2011), underscores that quantitative approaches carry the same ethical obligations as qualitative methods in terms of informed consent, voluntary participation, and data protection. Ethical practices were embedded in every stage of the research to uphold the principles of respect, integrity, and responsibility, irrespective of the methodology employed (Bryman, 2006). This approach aligns with the framework established by Beauchamp and Childress (2019), which emphasizes that ethical research must consistently apply core principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice across all phases of data collection and analysis.

3.6.1 Informed consent

For the quantitative part of the study, informed consent was taken from the CRMF couples (mostly women) by the female field worker associated with the project. All the research participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study. The field worker only approached families for the data collection if they had consented to give their basic demographic and socioeconomic details. Because this was an in-person survey, oral consent was primarily obtained during this phase of the investigation.

During the qualitative phase of the study, I obtained informed consent from all the participants before starting the interviews. This was mostly done in writing, as I was carrying consent forms with me, and I handed them to the participants to read those documents for themselves. Participants asked any questions they had, and once they understood the nature and purpose of the study, I proceeded with the interviews. The document contained details about how their data would be utilized and stored. When interviewing emerging adults, consent was mostly taken from their parents if they were present during the interview. However, adults were also informed about the nature of the study. Additionally, I provided information about both semi-structured and in-depth interview formats, including the expected time commitments for different participants. I also informed the participants that there are no wrong or right answers to any questions asked during the interview and clarified that the purpose of the interview was not to elicit correct or incorrect responses from them (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Before the actual interviews, I engaged in small talk to help the interviewees feel relaxed and connected while identifying our shared experiences, perspectives, or interests. I also introduced myself and gave as much detail as felt suitable to the interviewees.

3.6.2 Privacy and Confidentiality

Ensuring privacy and confidentiality constituted crucial ethical consideration during the research process. In the in-person survey, participant names and village information were collected for the quantitative component of the study. The participants were assured that their information would remain confidential and not be shared with any third party without their consent. Their names were only collected exclusively for the purpose of contacting them for interviews or requesting further information if needed. They were guaranteed anonymity, and their responses would be treated as confidential in any published materials.

The consent document for the qualitative portion of the study included information regarding privacy and confidentiality. No data was collected on the actual names and locations of the research participants; pseudonyms were employed immediately following the conclusion of the interviews. Participants were consistently assured of the confidentiality of their personal information and interview responses. Despite numerous challenges, all efforts were undertaken to establish a private environment within the existing constraints. The impact of family members' presence on participants' responses was acknowledged and taken into account during data analysis. This approach ensured that, while absolute privacy could not be guaranteed, the ethical principle of safeguarding participants' confidentiality was maintained to the highest degree possible.

3.6.3 Right to Withdraw and Absence of Direct Benefits

Participants were reminded several times during the research procedure that they might leave the study at any moment without facing any repercussions. This information was provided during initial contact, in-person surveys, face-to-face meetings, and at the beginning of each interview session. Transparency was maintained regarding the absence of direct benefits from participation, countering any potential misconceptions about immediate gains. This approach aligns with the ethical principle of honesty in research, as outlined by the Indian Sociological Society (ISS). Participants instead were made to feel that they were contributing to a broader social purpose by sharing their stories, experiences, and perspectives. I strived for honesty and responsibility in all aspects of the research process to conduct competent and ethical research work. In cases where the interviewee did not feel like continuing the interview or wanted to pause during the interview due to discussing upsetting themes, I stopped the interview immediately and gave time to the interviewee to feel better, or if they would rather not continue any further (Field, 2006). I also used my emotional experience to respond to the

difficult emotions during the interview. I followed up with certain interviewees to check how they were feeling after the interview.

3.6.4 Data Security and Access

All research data, including paper survey forms, Excel databases, audio recordings, and transcripts, remain under sole access control of mine. The quantitative data transferred from paper forms to password-protected Excel files and the qualitative recordings stored in restricted-access Google Drive folders are inaccessible to any third parties, including the field worker post-collection. This exclusive access control guarantees the preservation of participant confidentiality throughout the research process and beyond.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework and conceptual approach that guided this investigation into CRMFs in rural Haryana. The embedded mixed-methods design, grounded in pragmatic critical realism, proved essential for capturing both the structural patterns and lived experiences that characterize these families' complex realities. The integration of quantitative surveys across 497 families with qualitative interviews involving 76 stakeholders provided the analytical breadth and depth necessary to address the dissertation's multifaceted research questions. The selection of Narnaul block as the research site was methodologically justified by its unique convergence of demographic, economic, and environmental crises that exemplify contemporary challenges facing CRM practices. The evolutionary journey from a pilot study's purely qualitative approach to the current mixed-methods framework demonstrated the importance of methodological flexibility and cultural responsiveness in rural Indian research contexts. The biographical narrative method's limitations in collectivistic family settings led to more appropriate semi-structured and in-depth interview formats that respected local social dynamics while maintaining analytical rigor.

The development of the conceptual framework paralleled these methodological adaptations, evolving from initial theoretical assumptions to a more nuanced understanding based on empirical findings. The addition of CRMF parents, government officials and Sarpanches as research participants necessitated theoretical adjustments to better capture the multi-stakeholder nature of social evaluation processes. This iterative refinement of both methodology and conceptual approach enhanced the dissertation's ability to understand how

marriageability and social positioning operate across different perspectives and institutional levels.

The systematic attention to ethical considerations throughout all phases of data collection reflects the sensitive nature of researching marginalized families and intimate social relationships. The maintenance of informed consent, privacy protections, and data security protocols ensured participant welfare while enabling comprehensive data gathering across multiple stakeholder groups. This methodological approach, supported by an adaptive conceptual framework, successfully addressed the challenges of studying CRMFs within their authentic social contexts where individual narratives are embedded within family frameworks, where structural forces intersect with personal agency, and where multiple perspectives illuminate different dimensions of the same social phenomenon. The resulting dataset and theoretical insights provide a robust foundation for understanding how CRMFs navigate their complex social positioning in contemporary rural India, setting the stage for the empirical findings presented in subsequent three chapters.

Chapter 4: Between Margins and Mainstream: Mapping Socio-Economic and Demographic Profiles of CRMFs in Narnaul

This chapter provides a descriptive account of the socio-economic characteristics that map disadvantages among CRMFs in Narnaul[2]. The findings are based on a comprehensive survey of 52 villages in Narnaul Block, identifying 497 CRMFs. The survey collected quantitative data on patterns of origin, education status, natal-kin ties, and participation in self-help groups (SHGs) among CRMF mothers, and age structure, marital timing, caste composition, employment, and family size among CRMF mothers and fathers for the sample of 497 CRMFs (N = 497). This data outlines their socio-economic and demographic profiles, providing a robust foundation for analysis and highlighting their intersectional vulnerabilities. All quantitative data was analyzed using Jeffery's Amazing Statistical Program (JASP), an open-source, flexible statistics program designed to obtain precise output easily.

The chapter focuses on presenting this data to establish background and context, while deeper analysis through qualitative interviews appears in Chapters 5 and 6, where many of the disadvantages documented here are explored in greater detail through the lived experiences of CRMF mothers, fathers, and other family and community members. Missing data are reported alongside each table or figure; for example, age-based analyses exclude 15 deceased husbands where husband age was unavailable (reported sample for that analysis = 482). Quantitative tests are reported using standard conventions.

4.1 Background Characteristics of CRMFs

In this project, I define CRMFs as families formed through marriages between partners originating from different cultural and linguistic regions within India, with a minimum geographic distance of 500-kilometers between their native places. This threshold is designed to capture marriages that genuinely cross distinct regional contexts rather than neighboring areas with similar cultural characteristics. The subsequent analysis explores patterns across key variables, including origin and migration, family structure, education, employment, and social participation.

[2] Parts of this chapter appeared in earlier form in Ankit, "From margins to center: The role of community philanthropy in addressing discrimination and exclusion faced by cross-regional women in Mahendragarh District, Haryana," working paper, in *Research Fellowship Report Compendium 2024: Community Philanthropy in India* (Indian School of Development Management, 2025), 9-73.

4.1.1 The Long Journey Home: Geographical Origins of CRMF mothers

The village-level survey, conducted across all 52 villages in Narnaul Block, identified a total of 497 CRMFs. Table 6 below provides a breakdown of CRMF mothers by their states of origin, illustrating the geographic scope of CRMs in the study area.

Table 6

Native States of CRMF mothers in Narnaul

Native State	**Total Number**	**Percentage**
Arunachal Pradesh	1	0.201
Assam	48	9.658
West Bengal	37	7.445
Bihar	59	11.871
Chhattisgarh	12	2.414
Gujarat	1	0.201
Himachal Pradesh	1	0.201
Jharkhand	15	3.018
Karnataka	1	0.201
Madhya Pradesh	22	4.427
Maharashtra	9	1.811
Nepal	**3**	**0.604**
Odisha	17	3.421
Punjab	2	0.402
Tamil Nadu	2	0.402
Telangana	1	0.201
Tripura	5	1.006
Uttar Pradesh	257	51.710

Native State	Total Number	Percentage
Uttarakhand	4	0.805
Total	**497**	**100.00**

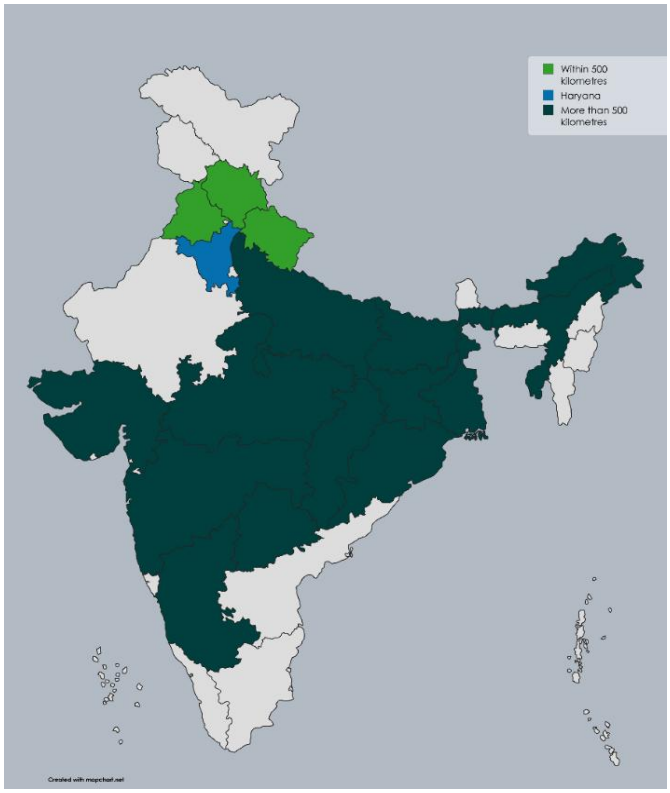
It reveals the diverse geographical origins of CRMF mothers across India. Uttar Pradesh dominates as the primary source state, with 257 women (51.7% of the sample), indicating a strong migration pattern from this region to Narnaul. Despite Uttar Pradesh's geographic proximity to Haryana, these marriages qualify as cross-regional for several compelling reasons. Most of the CRMF mothers originate from eastern Uttar Pradesh, where distances frequently exceed 500 kilometers due to the state's vast size. While they are fluent in Hindi, they speak the Bhojpuri dialect, creating significant communication barriers with local Haryanvi speakers who similarly require time to understand Bhojpuri. Beyond linguistic differences, substantial cultural and caste variations further reinforce the cross-regional nature of these unions.

Bihar represents the second-largest source with 59 women (11.9%), followed by Assam (9.7%), West Bengal (7.4%), and Madhya Pradesh (4.4%). The data demonstrates remarkable geographic diversity, with smaller but notable contributions from Jharkhand (3.0%) and Odisha (3.4%) and minimal representation from distant states including Arunachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, and Karnataka (0.2% each). Additional states such as Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Tripura, and Uttarakhand contribute smaller percentages but underscore the extensive geographic reach of these marriage patterns. Notably, the data includes three of them from Nepal (0.6%), highlighting the cross-national dimension of these marriages (Blanchet, 2005).

Among the 18 states represented, only three, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, fall within 500 kilometers of Narnaul, collectively representing merely 1.4% of CRMF mothers (see Figure 15).

Figure 15

Map of India indicating Distances from Native States of CRMF mothers in Narnaul



Note. Created on https://www.mapchart.net/india.html

This minimal proportion validates the cross-regional classification, while these three states still exhibit significant linguistic, cultural, and social class variations that distinguish them from Haryanvi contexts. Punjab, although adjacent to Haryana, was separated from it in 1966 along Cultural and linguistic lines highlight the distinct identities of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, which are hilly states characterized by their Pahari languages and unique cultural practices. This helps differentiate them from the predominantly plains-based culture of Haryana. The remaining 15 states account for 98.6% of CRMF mothers, all of whom traveled more than 500 kilometers to marry in Haryana. This considerable distance underscores the significant geographical, cultural, and linguistic barriers these women crossed to establish their marital homes in an entirely different regional context.

4.1.2 Age Profiles and Age at Marriage

Having established the diverse geographical origins and significant distances these CRMF mothers have traveled to marry in Haryana, it is now important to examine their current

demographic profiles. A key aspect of this demographic analysis is the current age of the CRMF mothers and fathers (see Figures 16 and 17 below).

Figure 16

Current Ages of CRMF mothers

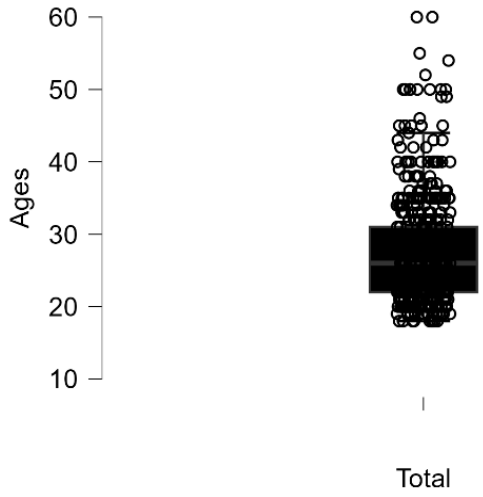
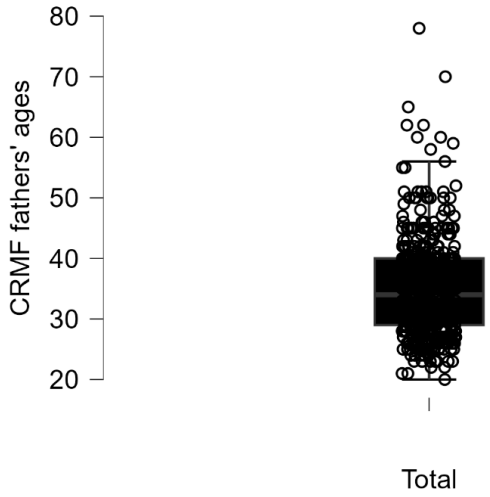


Figure 17

Current Ages of CRMF fathers

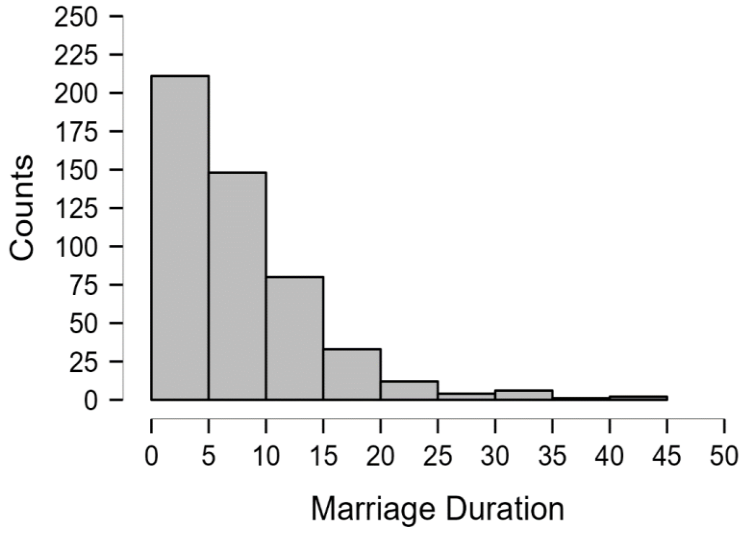


A detailed analysis of the age demographics reveals that a significant majority, 78%, of CRMF mothers currently fall within the age range of 18–32, with the average age being approximately 28 years (27.966 years, to be precise). This statistic underscores the relatively young age profile of these CRMF mothers. Conversely, only 22% of the CRMF mothers are aged beyond 32 years. In contrast, the age distribution of the CRMF fathers presents a slightly different picture. Approximately 69% of the CRMF fathers fall within the age range

of 18-38 years, while the remaining 31% are older than 38 years. The average age of the CRMF fathers stands at roughly 35 years (34.973 years), despite the exclusion of age-related data from 15 CRMF fathers who have passed away. This indicates a significant difference in the current ages of CRMF mothers and fathers, with fathers being older than their wives, reflecting traditional age norms in marital arrangements. Furthermore, an examination of the duration of these marriages provides additional insights (see Figure 18 below).

Figure 18

Average Marriage Duration (in years) of CRMs and their total Counts



On average, these CRMs have been in existence for approximately 8.1 years, with a standard deviation of 7.0 years (6.989 years). The dataset reveals considerable variation in marriage duration, ranging from very recent unions to well-established relationships. While the longest marriage has lasted for 45 years, the presence of CRMF mothers in their 50s and 60s indicates that some CRMs have been occurring for decades, demonstrating that this phenomenon is not entirely new to the region. However, the data shows a clear temporal shift: 42% of these CRMs are less than five years old, suggesting that a significant proportion of these unions are relatively recent. This trend aligns with existing research: Manisha (2024) found that 68% of CRMs in Jind district were less than 10 years old, while Reshma (2020) reported that 96% of CRMs in Hisar and Jhajjar districts also had durations under 10 years. These findings collectively indicate that while CRMs have occurred sporadically for decades, they have become substantially more common and accepted only recently, reflecting changing social patterns and possibly greater acceptance of such unions in Haryanvi society

over time. An analysis of the age at marriage reveals significant disparities between CRMF mothers and fathers. The mean age of marriage for CRMF mothers was 19.8 years, reflecting a trend toward early marriage among them. 27% of these CRMF mothers entered into marriage before reaching the legal adult age of 18, which underscores the prevalence of early marriage practices within this group. The scatter plot demonstrated a positive correlation, where older CRMF mothers tend to marry older CRMF fathers, with a few outliers. In stark contrast, the mean age at marriage for CRMF fathers was 27.3 years, indicating that they typically marry at a significantly older age compared to their wives. This age disparity is further highlighted by the fact that less than 1% of the CRMF fathers married before the age of 21, which is the legally sanctioned marriage age for men in India.

A paired-samples t-test comparing age at marriage for CRMF mothers (M = 19.8, SD = 4.238) and age at marriage for CRMF fathers (M = 27.3, SD = 5.277) indicated a significant difference, t (481) = -33.318, p < .001, Cohen's d = -1.518 (Table 7).

Table 7

Results of the Paired Samples T-Test for Age at Marriage between CRMF mothers and fathers

Paired Samples T-Test

Measure 1	Measure 2	t	df	p	Cohen's d	SE Cohen's d
Age at Marriage (CRMF mothers)	Age at Marriage (CRMF fathers)	33.318	81	.001	1.518	0.067

Note: Student’s t-test.

The analysis yielded a negative t-value and a highly significant p-value (p < .001), indicating that CRMF fathers are significantly older than CRMF mothers at the time of marriage. This conclusion is further supported by the effect size, calculated using Cohen's d, which was found to be -1.518. This value signifies a large effect, demonstrating a substantial age difference between spouses. The standard error of Cohen’s d (0.067) emphasizes the precision of this estimate, with the low standard error indicating that the estimate is reliable

and that the observed age difference represents a consistent trend in the sample population rather than random variation. Pearson's correlation also showed similar results, indicating a statistically significant moderate positive relationship ($r = 0.490$, $p < .001$) between the ages of CRMF mothers and CRMF fathers at marriage (see Appendix E).

Manisha's (2024) research provides valuable comparative insights into age profiles at marriage in both RMs and CRMs. Her findings reveal stark contrasts between the two groups: in RMs, only 5% of husbands were aged between 31 and 43 years at marriage, indicating that local men tend to marry younger, possibly reflecting community-specific cultural norms and socio-economic factors. Conversely, in CRMs, 33% of husbands fell within the 31-43 age range at marriage, suggesting that men entering CRMs are significantly more likely to marry at older ages. Manisha (2024) further found that almost 30% of CRM couples had age gaps of 11–20 years, compared to only 4% of RMs. Various social norms and socio-cultural conditioning support husband-older-than-wife marriages across many societies (Dommaraju, 2023; Gustafson & Fransson, 2015), persisting even without the economic and reproductive purposes of the past. People view large age gaps between spouses less negatively when husbands are older than when wives are older (Banks & Arnold, 2001). In Narnaul, the greater variation in CRMF fathers' marriage ages suggests that men have more flexibility in marriage timing compared to women, potentially correlating with social or economic factors. The early marriage age for a substantial proportion of CRMF mothers raises important considerations regarding their educational and socio-economic opportunities, as early marriage often curtails prospects for continued education and personal development. The significant age gap between spouses can also influence power dynamics within marriage, potentially affecting decision-making processes and overall marital relationships. According to UNICEF research from 2023, more than half of the world's child brides reside in five Indian states: Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh. Early marriage trends in CRMs are indicative of regional customs where child marriage is still common, as 77.3% of mothers in the CRMF are from these states. Chandra et al.'s (2023) recent study, which used data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), shows alarming links between intimate partner violence and spousal age differences. They discovered that the highest number of married women reporting intimate partner violence—30%—occurred among those with spousal age disparities of 5–10 years. Compared to men under 20, men over 30 are more than twice as likely to abuse their wives. Geographic distance from natal families creates vulnerability. During research, a group of CRMF moms

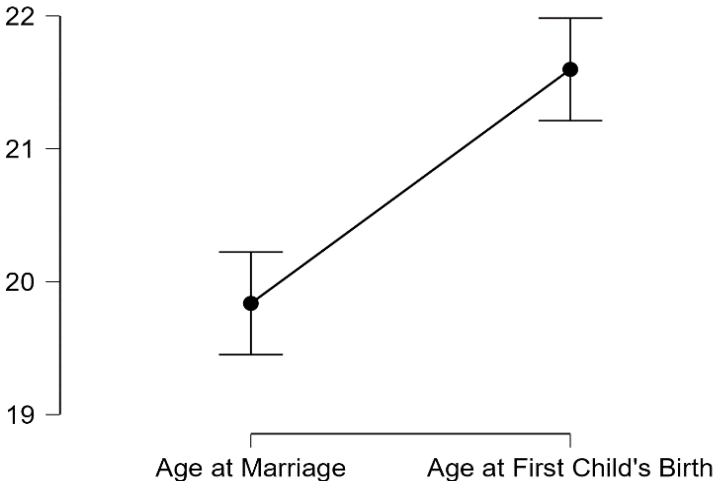
related their experiences of domestic abuse, saying that their husbands could easily control and beat them because "they know we have nowhere to go in those situations."

4.1.3 Family Formation and Caste Composition

On average, CRMF mothers had their first child within approximately two years of marriage, with a mean age of 21.6 years at the time of their first childbirth (see Figure 19 below).

Figure 19

Age at Marriage and Age at First Child's Birth for CRMF mothers



This figure underscores the close temporal proximity between marriage and childbirth among CRMF mothers, emphasizing the rapid transition from newly married status to young motherhood. The swift progression into motherhood reflects cultural expectations and social norms that prioritize early family formation. This pattern aligns with findings that the primary motivation for local men entering CRMs is to establish families and have children, particularly sons, demonstrating the persistence of son preference (Mishra & Kaur, 2023). Such early motherhood carries profound implications for CRMF mothers' personal and socio-economic development. The responsibilities of child-rearing during the early years of marriage place additional demands on these young women as they simultaneously adapt to new familial roles and unfamiliar environments, often curtailing their educational and career aspirations. This dual burden of adjustment to marriage and immediate motherhood occurs while navigating cultural and linguistic differences in their new communities. Importantly, CRMs occur across all caste categories, challenging the widely held assumption that such unions are predominantly an "upper caste" phenomenon (Table 8). This demographic

diversity suggests that the factors driving CRMs transcend caste boundaries, indicating broader structural and social forces at play.

Table 8

CRMF mothers' native states and caste composition of CRMFs

	Caste of CRMFs								
Native State	Brahmin	Chamar	Gurjar	Jat	Other OBCs *	Rajput	Other SCs **	Saini	Ahir
Arunachal Pradesh	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Assam	5	5	0	7	0	0	1	0	30
West Bengal	3	1	0	4	1	0	1	2	25
Bihar	6	7	3	5	10	0	0	4	24
Gujarat	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Himachal	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Jharkhand	3	2	0	0	1	0	1	0	8
Karnataka	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Madhya Pradesh	2	4	0	3	2	0	1	0	10
Maharashtra	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	6
Nepal	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Odisha	2	0	1	3	2	0	0	0	9
Punjab	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Tamil Nadu	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Telangana	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tripura	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	2
Uttar Pradesh	26	10	3	38	10	2	4	6	158
Uttarakhand	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Chhattisgarh	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	7

Native State	Caste of CRMFs								
	Brahmin	Chamar	Gurjar	Jat	Other OBCs *	Rajput	Other SCs **	Saini	Ahir
Total	50	30	7	72	27	2	8	14	287

Note: 1. *Naik, Swami, Khati, Jogi, Sunar/Soni, Sain

2. **Balmiki, Dhanak, Doom, Khatik

3. Caste categories represent the families CRMF mothers married into, not their natal family castes.

In her research on bride-sending regions of West Bengal and Odisha, Kukreja (2017) found that among women in CRMs in northern India, approximately 54% came from Scheduled Caste Hindu families, 9% from Other Backward Class (OBC) castes, and another 9% from general or upper castes. Given that Narnaul is predominantly populated by the Ahir community (an OBC caste), it is expected that CRMF mothers may not belong to the same caste as their marital families, reflecting the cross-caste or inter-caste nature of these unions. In Narnaul's social hierarchy, upper castes include Brahmin, Jat, and Rajput communities. The Other Backward Classes (OBCs) primarily comprise Ahir, Gurjar, Saini, and a section of the Rajput community, while the Chamar community represents the largest Scheduled Caste group. The data reveals distinct regional-caste patterns among CRMF mothers. Uttar Pradesh, with its substantial representation, demonstrates remarkable caste diversity, with CRMF mothers marrying into Brahmin, Chamar, Gujjar, Jat, Other OBC, Rajput, Other SC, Saini, and Ahir families. Bihar shows concentrated patterns, with CRMF mothers predominantly marrying into Brahmin, Chamar, and Other OBC families, while those from Assam primarily join Brahmin, Chamar, and Jat families. States like West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Madhya Pradesh contribute notable numbers but with less caste diversity in marriage patterns. Smaller contributing states including Arunachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana, show minimal representation, with CRMF mothers typically marrying into Jat families or other caste communities.

4.2 Access to Social and Cultural Capital

4.2.1 Participation in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Access to Natal Kin

One immediate indicator of social capital access for CRMF mothers is their participation in self-help groups (SHGs). SHGs are mutual aid organizations where individuals with common interests come together to save and invest collectively, reaching approximately 50 million women across India (National Rural Livelihood Mission [NRLM], 2020). Through improving financial literacy, expanding access to credit, and promoting communal solidarity, these organizations play a critical role in the empowerment of women. Because women's SHGs have been successful and long-lasting, SHG programs in India specifically target women, in addition to the fact that they have a lower social status than men (Parida & Sinha, 2010). Research indicates that SHGs have a major positive influence on women's understanding of their fundamental rights, mobility, and decision-making over the size of their families (Kumar et al., 2021). In India, SHGs are used to carry out the majority of women's group projects. They serve as vehicles for women's empowerment, platforms for service delivery, and collateral replacements that aid in the development of social capital. Originally intended as savings and credit organizations, SHGs have broadened their purview to encompass promoting health and nutrition knowledge, enhancing governance procedures, and tackling social concerns including discrimination based on caste and gender (Kumar et al., 2021). Women who participate in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) get the self-assurance and assistance required to take control of their lives and make more meaningful contributions to their families and communities. Through group-building activities that improve listening skills, foster trust, increase participation, and address social concerns like domestic violence and dowries, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) create safe spaces for women to express their thoughts and share their experiences. This helps them to build social capital. Three immediate benefits of group membership are identified by Brody et al. (2017) in their systematic analysis of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in South Asia: an increase in social capital, exposure to group support, and better access to financing, training, and resources. Improved autonomy and self-efficacy, lower debt, and higher income and savings are some of the intermediate results they produce.

Despite these significant benefits, it is concerning that more than 96% of CRMF mothers are not part of SHGs, with a mere 20 of them found to be participating in such groups. This lack of participation in SHGs essentially means that during times of distress or crisis, CRMF mothers do not have any formal support groups to approach for assistance.

Their low participation rate in SHGs starkly highlights their deprivation of social capital, structural, relational, and cognitive (Nahapiet & Ghosal, 1998). The lack of SHG involvement means they miss out on essential networks that facilitate collective action, crucial for resource-sharing and collective problem-solving. Without SHGs, they are deprived of the trust and mutual support that strong peer bonds provide, leaving them isolated and unsupported during personal and social crises. Additionally, the absence of SHG participation prevents them from developing collective identity and shared goals, which are essential for effective collaboration toward common objectives. Consequently, the deficiency in all three types of social capital severely restricts their ability to navigate challenges, acquire support, and advocate for their rights, illustrating the importance of targeted interventions to integrate them into SHGs and other supportive networks.

However, the data also reveals that more than 93% of CRMF mothers maintain some form of contact with their natal families, albeit primarily through phone calls. Interestingly, CRMF mothers who lack contact with their natal families are older on average (mean age 31.9 years) compared to those who maintain contact (mean age 27.7 years) (see Figures 20 and 21 below).

Figure 20

Age Distribution of CRMF mothers with Natal Family Contact

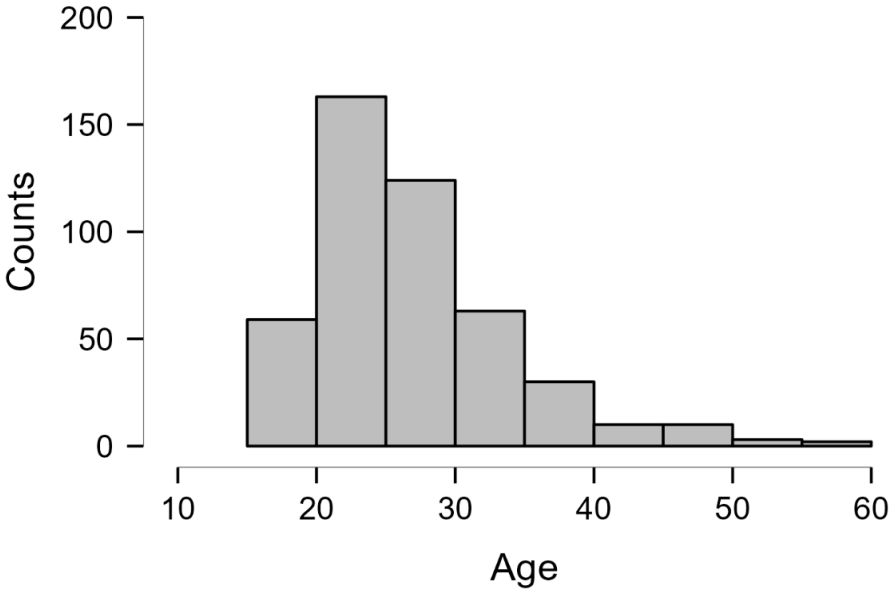
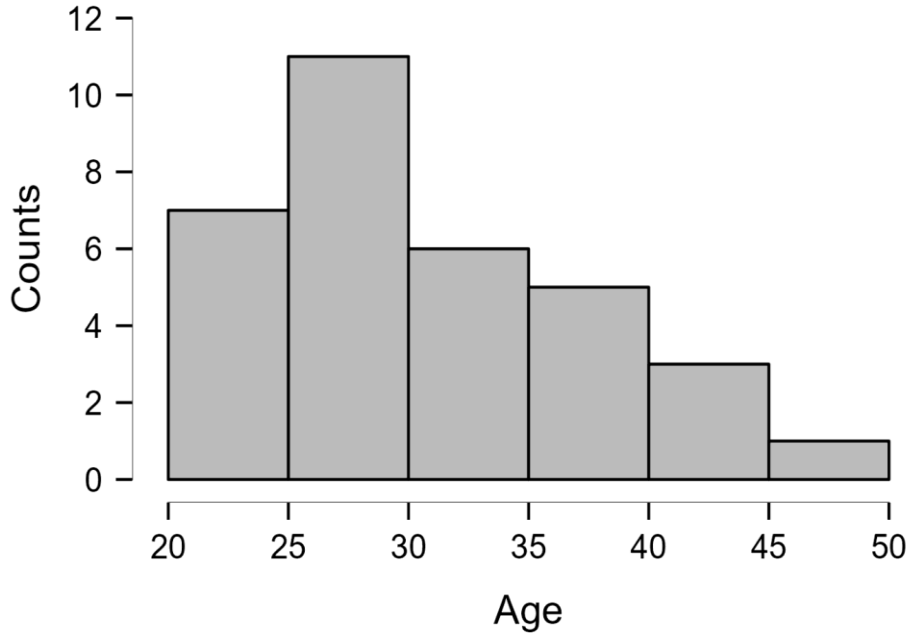


Figure 21

Age Distribution of CRMF mothers with No Natal Family Contact



This trend suggests that older CRMF mothers, who perhaps married at an earlier age and have been settled in Haryana for longer periods, encounter it more challenging to maintain ties with their natal families over time. The duration of their marriages and the process of integrating into their new environments may have contributed to the gradual erosion of these familial connections. Although physical visits to natal families are infrequent due to geographical distances, the maintenance of contact through phone calls indicates a strong desire to remain connected, especially among younger CRMF mothers. However, it was difficult to ascertain the specific conditions under which they sought support from their natal families, as interviews often took place in the presence of husbands or other family members. Among the 33 CRMF mothers reporting no natal family contact, the distribution reveals regional patterns: 9 from Assam, 8 from Bihar, 4 from West Bengal, 4 from Jharkhand, 2 from Madhya Pradesh, 2 from Uttar Pradesh, 2 from Odisha, 1 from Tripura, and 1 from Chhattisgarh. Younger CRMF mothers, particularly those from Uttar Pradesh, tend to maintain natal family contact, while older women, more often from Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar, show weaker connections. This phenomenon reflects how relationships with natal families tend to weaken over time due to distance and other factors, whereas early marriage years maintain stronger familial ties (Chaudhry, 2019). Within individual caste groups, maintaining natal family contact remains generally high. The Ahir group shows

particularly strong connections, with 274 out of 287 CRMF mothers maintaining contact (see Table 9 below). However, as feminist scholars argue, marriage rules inherent in patriarchal kinship systems, such as patrilocal residence, adversely affect female marriage migrants' autonomy, bargaining power, and status within marriages and families (Palriwala & Uberoi, 2005). Unlike chain migrants who can turn to co-ethnics for support (Hagan, 1998), marriage migrants typically migrate alone and interact mainly with their husband's families (Chatterjee & Desai, 2020). Social isolation, combined with language barriers and discrimination, may deprive brides of agency and compel obedience to husbands and in-laws (Constable, 2004; Menjívar & Salcido, 2002).

Table 9

Contingency Table: Contact with Native Family by CRMF's Caste

Contingency Table

CRMF's Caste	**Contact with Native Family (in numbers)**		**Total**
	No	**Yes**	
Brahmin	5	45	50
Chamar	7	23	30
Gurjar	3	4	7
Jat	1	71	72
Other OBCs	1	26	27
Rajput	0	2	2
Other SCs	1	7	8
Saini	2	12	14
Ahir	13	274	287
Total	**33**	**464**	**497**

Some groups, like the Gurjar and Chamar, have a noticeable proportion of CRMF mothers who do not maintain contact with their natal families, indicating potential barriers or challenges unique to these communities. Manisha's (2024) comparative research in Jind reveals striking differences between RMs and CRMs: while 99% of women in RMs maintained contact with their natal families and visited them regularly, only 76% of women

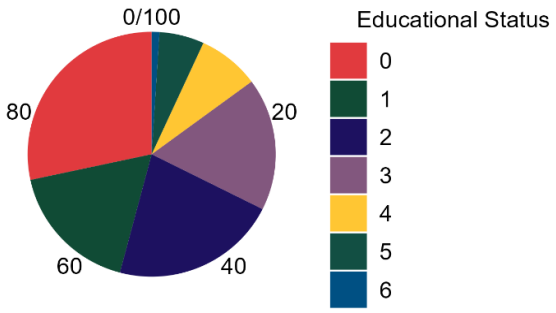
in CRMs reported ever visiting their natal families. More concerning, 39% of CRMF mothers had never received visits from their natal families in rural Haryana, and 80% had never visited relatives or friends alone. Although women become increasingly incorporated into their marital homes as their married lives progress, they never completely become kin to their affines (Palriwala, 1991). Dyson and Moore (1983) argue that the greater distances over which marriages are arranged in North India tend to constrain or erode personal links between married women and their natal kin, and the absence of support structures diminishes their autonomy (Dyson & Moore, 1983). However distance may be the only one element in married women's relations with natal kin as several determining factors for them visiting their natal homes include seeking permission from husbands and elder affinal kin, finding substitutes for their work during absence, and having someone to accompany them to their natal villages (Chaudhry, 2019). Chaudhry (2019) found that natal kin contact is not sought on a daily basis by married women, as their lives are situated in their affinal villages where their in-laws, husbands, children, and work are located. Marriage entails a reconfiguration of women's social worlds and everyday relationships. Once married, they are expected to exercise reserve in approaching natal kin, who are excluded from daily conflicts in the marital village. Yet natal kin contact becomes highly significant in situations where women require support. Knowing they could call on natal kin provided most regional brides with assurance and a greater sense of potential rescue, particularly during marital violence, breakdown, and widowhood (Chaudhry, 2019).

4.2.2 Educational Attainment within CRMFs

CRMF mothers in Narnaul faced substantial barriers to accessing education in their natal homes, challenges that persist in their affinal homes as well. The data reveals significant educational disparities among them, with a mean education level of 1.81 (on a scale where 0 represents no education and 6 represents postgraduate studies; see Figure 22 below) indicating a substantial educational deficit.

Figure 22

Educational Status of CRMF mothers in Narnaul

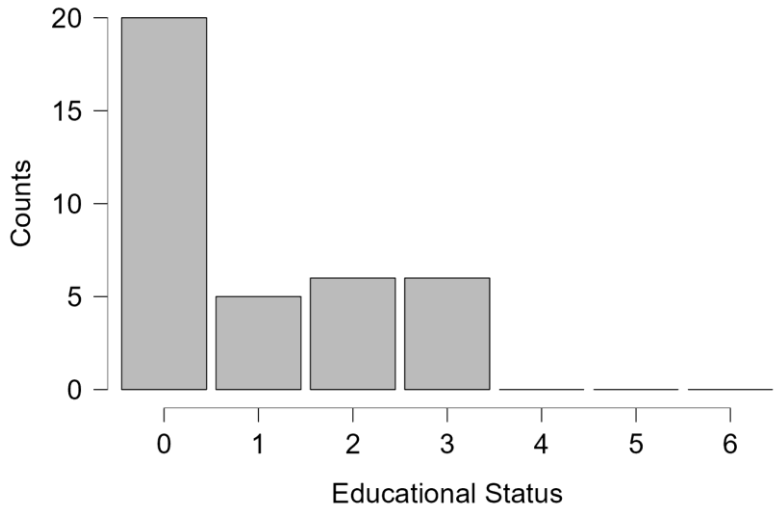


Note: Educational status levels: 0=no education (28.3%), 1=primary level (17.5%), 2=middle school (21.7%), 3=high school (17.5%), 4=secondary school (8%), 5=graduate (5.8%), 6=post-graduate (1%).

These figures illustrate the pervasive educational inequalities and substantial barriers that CRMF mothers face in achieving higher education. Younger CRMF mothers, who have had more recent access to educational opportunities, exhibit slightly higher levels of education compared to their older counterparts. For a clearer picture of these disparities, Figures 23 and 24 illustrate the cases of West Bengal with older CRMs and Uttar Pradesh with younger CRMs, respectively.

Figure 23

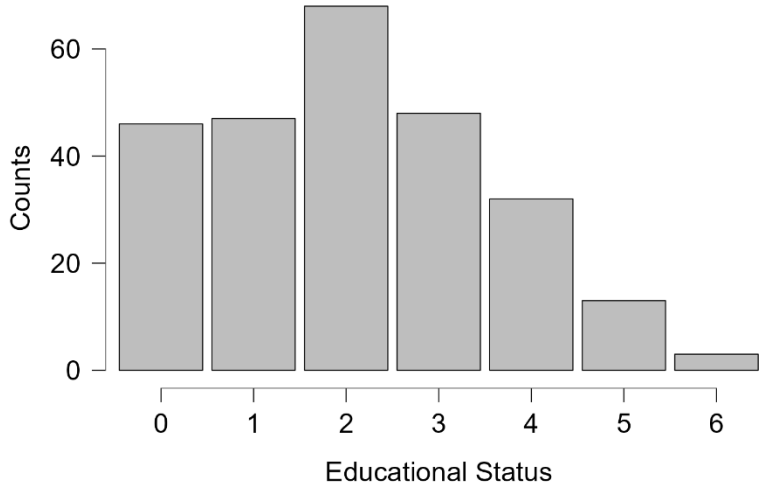
Educational Status of CRMF mothers from West Bengal



Note: Educational status levels: 0=no education, 1=primary level, 2=middle school, 3=high school, 4=secondary school, 5=graduate, 6=post-graduate.

Figure 24

Educational Status of CRMF mothers from Uttar Pradesh



Note: Educational status levels: 0=no education, 1=primary level, 2=middle school, 3=high school, 4=secondary school, 5=graduate, 6=post-graduate.

These figures demonstrate stark regional differences in educational attainment patterns. CRMF mothers from West Bengal show a heavily skewed distribution toward no formal education, with 20 out of 37 women (54%) having no schooling at all, and very few achieving education beyond the primary level. This concentration at the lowest educational levels reflects both the older age profile of this group and limited historical access to education in their regions of origin. In contrast, CRMF mothers from Uttar Pradesh display a more distributed educational pattern across all levels, with the highest concentration at the the middle school level (approximately 65 women) and significant numbers across primary, high school, and secondary levels. This broader distribution suggests greater educational access and aligns with their younger demographic profile and more recent migration patterns. Notably, Uttar Pradesh also shows representation at graduate and postgraduate levels, unlike West Bengal, where virtually no women achieved higher education. Manisha's (2024) comparative research reveals significant educational disparities between RMs and CRMs. In RMs, 85% of women had completed at least middle school education, compared to only 44% of women in CRMs. Similarly, among husbands, 91% in RMs had completed middle school or higher, while only 66% in CRMs achieved this level. Poverty and early marriage were

identified as the two primary barriers preventing women from continuing their education. Interestingly, the analysis further revealed no significant relationship between family caste and the educational status of CRMF mothers, as supported by chi-squared test results. A chi-square test of independence indicated no significant association between family caste and educational status of CRMF mothers, χ^2 (48, N = 497) = 47.768, p = .482 (see Table 10 below).

Table 10

Chi-Square Test for CRMF Caste and Educational Attainment of CRMF mothers

Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	p
X^2	47.768	8	0.482
N	497		

The lack of a significant relationship between CRMF caste and educational attainment of CRMF mothers can be attributed to a methodological consideration: the caste data collected pertains to the families they married into, rather than their own natal caste backgrounds. Since educational attainment typically occurs before marriage and is influenced by natal family circumstances, the marital family's caste status would not be expected to correlate with the educational levels that CRMF mothers achieved in their natal contexts. This finding suggests that educational disadvantage among CRMF mothers cuts across all caste categories of receiving families, indicating that CRM patterns draw educationally disadvantaged women into families of varying caste backgrounds. Building on patterns observed in the qualitative data, the analysis further explored whether higher education levels correlate with delayed age at marriage among CRMF mothers. While this was not a pre-established hypothesis at the start of data collection, the relationship emerged as a relevant area of inquiry during analysis. Pearson's r indicated a weak positive relationship between educational status and age at marriage among CRMF mothers (r = .161, p < .001; see Table 11).

Table 11

Pearson's Correlation for Age at Marriage and Educational Attainment of CRMF mothers

Pearson's Correlation

Variable		Educational Attainment of CRMF mothers	Age at Marriage
1. Educational Attainment of CRMF mothers	Pearson's r	—	
	p-value	—	
2. Age at Marriage	Pearson's r	0.161	—
	p-value	< .001	—

This statistically significant but modest correlation suggests that while higher education is associated with slightly later marriage age, educational attainment explains only about 2.6% of the variance in marriage timing among this population. The weak correlation indicates that multiple factors beyond education influence marriage age among CRMF mothers. Cultural norms emphasizing early marriage, economic pressures on families, limited agency in marriage decisions, and regional practices likely play more substantial roles in determining when they marry (Chaudhry, 2016). The finding aligns with the broader pattern observed in this project: despite varying educational levels, the majority of CRMF mothers married young, with 27% marrying before age 18. This situation also reflects Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital deficits (Bourdieu, 1986). The low educational levels among CRMF mothers represent limited cultural capital, the educational credentials and cultural knowledge that facilitate social mobility (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Simultaneously, their geographic isolation from natal families and minimal participation in social networks like self-help groups indicate restricted access to social capital, the connections and networks that provide support and opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986). These intersecting disadvantages create compounding barriers: limited education restricts economic opportunities, early marriage curtails further educational advancement, and social isolation

reduces access to information and support systems that might enable different life trajectories.

4.3 Family Size and Economic Conditions among CRMFs

4.3.1 Family Size and Fertility Patterns among CRMFs

The dissertation analyzed 497 CRMFs, encompassing a total of 738 children, resulting in an average of 1.485 children per family (see Table 12 below).

Table 12

Number of Children per CRMF in Narnaul

Number of Children	Number of Families	Percentage
0	98	19.718
1	139	27.968
2	199	40.040
3	47	9.457
4	12	2.414
5	1	0.201
7	1	0.201
Total	**497**	**100**

40% of CRMFs had two children, reflecting a common preference within this population, while nearly 28% had only one child, indicating a significant segment favoring smaller family units. Additionally, 20% of CRMFs were childless, which can be attributed to the early stage of their marriages, as these couples may not have had sufficient time since marriage to start families or may still be in the family planning phase. However, there is a statistically significant moderate positive correlation between the number of children and the duration of marriage among CRMFs. Pearson's r indicated a moderate positive relationship between the two ($r = .545$, $p < .001$; see Table 13 below).

Table 13

Pearson's Correlation Results for Children and Marriage Duration among CRMFs

Pearson's Correlation

Variable		Number of Children	Marriage Duration
1. Number of Children	Pearson's r	—	
	p-value	—	
2. Marriage Duration	Pearson's r	0.545	—
	p-value	< .001	—

This statistically significant correlation suggests that as marriage duration increases, family size tends to increase correspondingly, explaining approximately 30% of the variance in the number of children among these families. Furthermore, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict the number of children based on CRMF mothers' age, educational attainment, and CRMF caste. The overall model explained 21.8% of the variance in family size among CRMFs ($R^2 = .218$; see Table 14).

Table 14

Model Summary for Number of Children

Model Summary for Number of Children

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	RMSE
H_0	.000	.00	0.000	.032
H_1	467	.21	0.202	.922

The regression coefficients revealed two significant predictors of family size (see Table 15). CRMF mothers' age emerged as the strongest positive predictor ($t = 10.063$, $p < .001$), with each additional year of age associated with an increase of 0.058 children,

indicating that older women have more children, likely reflecting longer marriage duration and completed fertility. Educational attainment showed a significant negative relationship with family size ($t = -3.561$, $p < .001$), with each unit increase in educational level associated with a decrease of 0.096 children, suggesting that higher educated CRMF mothers tend to have smaller families.

Table 15

Regression Coefficients for Family Size among CRMFs

Regression Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standardized[a]	t	p
H_0	Intercept	1.485	0.046		.2081	.001
H_1	Intercept	0.108	0.209		.514	.608
	CRMF mothers' Ages	0.058	0.006	0.421	0.063	.001
	Educational Attainment of CRMF mothers	-0.096	0.027	-0.147	3.561	.001
	CRMF's Caste (Chamar)	-0.396	0.214		1.852	.065
	CRMF's Caste (Gurjar)	-0.505	0.376		1.342	.180
	CRMF's Caste (Jat)	-0.050	0.170		0.294	.769
	CRMF's Caste (other OBC)	-0.090	0.220		0.407	.684
	CRMF's Caste (Rajput)	-0.206	0.665		0.309	.757

Regression Coefficients

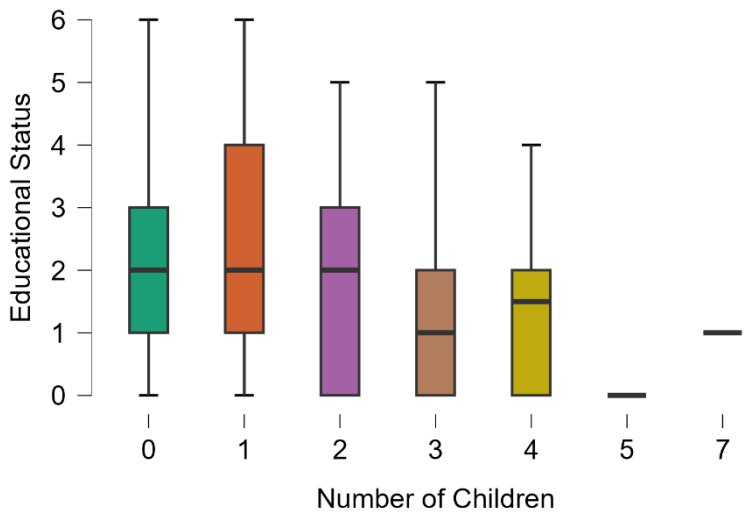
Model		Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standardized[a]	t	p
	CRMF's Caste (other SCs)	0.476	0.351		.354	.176
	CRMF's Caste (Saini)	-0.032	0.280		0.115	.908
	CRMF's Caste (Ahir)	-0.068	0.142		0.477	.633

Note: Standardized coefficients can only be computed for continuous predictors.

Notably, none of the caste categories showed statistically significant effects on family size when controlling for age and education. This finding indicates that fertility patterns are consistent across different caste groups within CRMFs, suggesting that individual characteristics such as age and educational attainment are more influential determinants of family size than the caste status of the marital family. Complete model statistics including the F-test are provided in Appendix F. To further illustrate the relationship between family size and educational attainment among CRMF mothers, Figure 25 provides a visual representation of this association.

Figure 25

Family Size by Educational Status of CRMF mothers



Note: Educational status levels: 0=no education (28.3%), 1=primary level (17.5%), 2=middle school (21.7%), 3=high school (17.5%), 4=secondary school (8%), 5=graduate (5.8%), 6=postgraduate (1%).

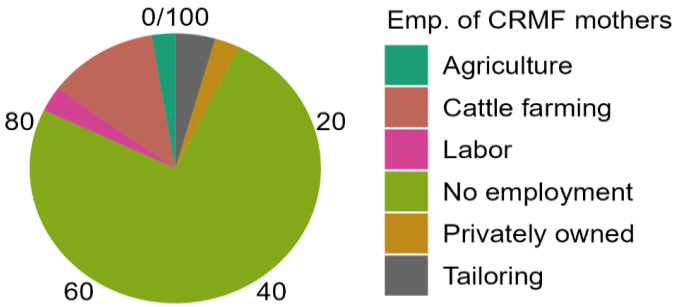
Examining the mean educational attainment levels for CRMF mothers with different numbers of children reveals a clear inverse relationship. CRMF mothers with fewer children consistently demonstrate higher educational levels, while those with larger families show progressively lower educational attainment. The pattern is most evident when comparing the extremes: CRMF mothers with no children have a mean educational level of 2.041 (between middle school and high school), while those with one child show the highest mean educational level at 2.245. However, as family size increases, educational attainment decreases substantially. CRMF mothers with two children have a mean educational level of 1.623 (between primary and middle school), those with three children drop to 1.021 (just above primary level), and those with four children show a mean of 1.250. The few CRMF mothers with five or six children show very low educational levels (0.000 and 1.000, respectively), though these represent only individual cases. This pattern suggests several interconnected factors: Higher-educated CRMF mothers may have greater access to family planning information and resources, enabling them to make informed decisions about family size. Additionally, the demands of child-rearing may have interrupted educational pursuits for those who married and began childbearing at younger ages, creating a cycle where early fertility limits educational advancement, which in turn may influence subsequent fertility decisions.

4.3.2 Employment Status and Economic Roles

Only a minority of CRMF mothers are employed or have independent sources of income, such as working as tailors or in small salons in Narnaul (see Figure 26).

Figure 26

Employment Status of CRMF mothers in Narnaul



Among the 497 CRMF mothers, the majority (412) are not employed. The largest group among employed CRMF mothers works in cattle rearing (119), followed by tailoring (29), labor (28), and farming (24). A chi-square test of independence indicated no significant association between educational attainment and employment status among CRMF mothers, χ^2 (30, N = 497) = 26.821, p = .633 (see Table 16).

Table 16

Chi-Square Test Results for Educational Attainment and Employment Status of CRMF mothers

Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	p
X^2	26.821	0	0.633
N	497		

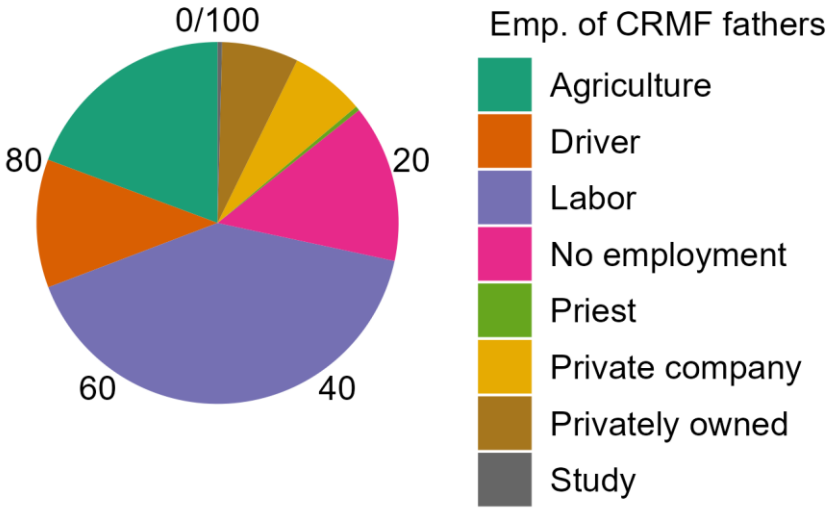
The non-significant relationship between education and employment reflects the limited employment opportunities available to CRMF mothers regardless of their educational level. Most CRMF mothers have not completed education beyond primary or middle school levels, constraining their access to formal employment and limiting opportunities to informal

or agricultural work. This pattern aligns with Kukreja's (2017) findings from bride-sending regions, where 57% of women were farm laborers or daily wage workers, and another 16% were tenant farmers. These CRMF women originate from economically disadvantaged families unable to provide educational opportunities that would facilitate cultural capital accumulation, creating intergenerational cycles of limited economic mobility. Post-marriage circumstances further constrain employment prospects, as they are expected to manage household responsibilities, including childcare, eldercare, and livestock management. The combination of limited pre-marriage educational opportunities, early marriage and childbearing, and extensive domestic responsibilities creates substantial barriers to formal employment participation, reinforcing patterns of economic dependency within their marital households.

The breakdown of employment statuses among CRMF fathers shows that the largest group works in labor (303), followed by farming (152) and driving (78) (see Figure 27).

Figure 27

Employment Status of CRMF fathers in Narnaul



The data highlights a predominant reliance on labor-intensive occupations, with most CRMF fathers engaged in manual labor, agricultural work, or driving, employment sectors that typically offer limited income stability and economic security. This employment pattern underscores the economic challenges faced by CRMFs in Narnaul, as these occupations are often characterized by irregular income, seasonal variations, and limited opportunities for

economic advancement. Table 17 presents the contingency analysis showing the relationship between CRMF mothers' employment status and their husbands' employment categories.

Table 17

Employment Status of CRMF mothers by CRMF fathers' Employment Status

Contingency Table

Employment Status of CRMF mothers	Employment Status of CRMF fathers								
	Company	Driver	Farming	Own	Priest	Study	Labor	No employment	Total
Cattle	0	16	36	7	0	0	43	17	119
Farming	0	0	21	0	0	0	0	3	24
Tailoring	0	4	4	0	0	0	12	9	29
Labor	0	10	0	0	0	0	9	9	28
Own	2	0	4	3	0	1	11	5	26
No employment	34	48	87	34	5	0	228	76	512
Total	36	78	152	44	5	1	303	119	738

This contingency table reveals several important patterns in the employment dynamics within CRMFs. The most striking finding is the overwhelming concentration of unemployment among CRMF mothers: 512 out of 738 (69.4%) are not employed, regardless of their husbands' employment status. Even among CRMF fathers working in labor (the largest employment category with 303 individuals), 228 of their wives (75.2%) remain unemployed. The data shows some occupational clustering within households. For instance, among the 24 CRMF mothers engaged in farming, 21 (87.5%) have husbands who also work in farming, suggesting household-level agricultural engagement. Similarly, cattle rearing

appears more common among wives of drivers (16 out of 78) and farmers (36 out of 152), possibly reflecting the compatibility of livestock management with these occupations' schedules. Notably, certain employment sectors for CRMF fathers correlate with slightly higher female employment rates. Wives of drivers show relatively higher participation in cattle rearing and tailoring, while wives of farmers engage more frequently in cattle rearing. However, even in these cases, the majority of women remain unemployed. The pattern suggests that CRMF mothers' employment is largely independent of their husbands' occupational status, with structural barriers to female employment appearing consistent across different household economic contexts. This reinforces the earlier finding of no significant assocforiation between education and employment among CRMF mothers, suggesting that employment constraints operate beyond individual qualifications or household economic circumstances. The limited employment diversity among both partners highlights the economic vulnerability of CRMFs, with most households dependent on single, often unstable income sources from male employment in labor-intensive sectors.

However, in contrast to CRMF mothers, CRMF fathers show a significantly different pattern. A chi-square test of independence indicated a highly significant association between CRMF fathers' employment status and CRMF caste, χ^2 (56, N = 497) = 105.825, p < .001 (see Table 18).

Table 18

Chi-Square Test Results for Employment Status of CRMF fathers and CRMF's Caste

Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	p
X^2	105.825	56	< .001
N	497		

This finding suggests that caste significantly influences the types of employment opportunities available or pursued by CRMF fathers. The contingency analysis reveals distinct caste-based employment patterns among CRMF fathers (see Table 19). The Ahir community, representing the largest group (287 individuals), shows employment

concentration in labor (103), farming (67), and driving (37), reflecting traditional occupational patterns. Brahmin CRMF fathers demonstrate more diverse employment, with representation across company jobs (6), own businesses (6), and professional roles, including two in priestly occupations. Jat CRMF fathers show relatively balanced distribution across farming (19), labor (21), company employment (7), and driving (10), with some engaged in their own businesses.

Table 19

Employment Status of CRMF fathers by CRMF's Caste

Contingency Table

	Employment Status of CRMF fathers								
CRMF's Caste	**Company**	**Driver**	**Farming**	**Labor**	**No employment**	**Own**	**Priest**	**Study**	**Total**
Brahmin				4	5				0
Chamar				2	2				0
Gurjar					0				
Jat		0	9	1	12				2
OBC				7	4				7
Rajput					0				
SC					1				
Saini					0				4
Ahir	8	7	7	03	46	5			87
Total	**3**	**7**	**6**	**03**	**70**	**4**			**97**

Notably, certain castes show strong occupational clustering: Chamar CRMF fathers are predominantly in labor (22 out of 30), while Saini CRMF fathers show higher

representation in self-employment (4 out of 14). The employment patterns suggest that traditional caste-based occupational structures continue to influence livelihood strategies among CRMF fathers, with some communities having better access to diverse employment opportunities while others remain concentrated in manual labor sectors. This caste-employment relationship among CRMF fathers contrast sharply with the lack of such association among CRMF mothers, suggesting that while male employment opportunities are influenced by caste networks and traditional occupational patterns, female employment constraints operate more uniformly across caste boundaries.

These employment patterns reflect broader economic vulnerabilities within CRMFs across the region. In Jind district, another area experiencing increasing CRMs in rural Haryana, Manisha (2024) found that only 69% of CRMFs had pucca (concrete) houses compared to 86% of families with RMs, while 29% lived in semi-pucca housing. Similarly, Kukreja's (2017) research revealed that 68% of husbands in CRMFs were either landless or had marginal land holdings, with this figure reaching 89% in Rewari, another Ahir-dominated district. Her study also confirmed no significant relationship between women's educational status and employment status, corroborating the findings from Narnaul and suggesting that barriers to female employment in CRMs operate consistently across different districts in Haryana.

One-way ANOVA analyses revealed significant associations between employment status and family size for both CRMF mothers and fathers (detailed results in Appendix F). CRMF mothers' employment status showed a significant relationship with the number of children, $F(5, 491) = 4.687$, $p < .001$, indicating that differences in family size across different employment categories are statistically significant. CRMF fathers' employment status also revealed a significant but weaker relationship with family size, $F(7, 489) = 2.086$, $p = .044$. While there is a significant difference in the number of children based on fathers' employment status, the effect is less pronounced compared to that of mothers' employment status. These results suggest that CRMF mothers' employment status has a stronger impact on family size compared to that of their husbands, which may reflect the critical role that women's employment plays in family planning and childbearing d Significant correlations between job status and family size were found by one-way ANOVA analyses for both CRMF fathers and mothers (full results in Appendix F). The number of children was significantly correlated with the job level of CRMF mothers ($F(5,491) = 4.687$, $p <.001$), suggesting that

variations in family size among various employment groups are statistically significant. Additionally, there was a significant but lower correlation between the job status of CRMF dads and family size ($F(7, 489) = 2.086$, $p = .044$). Although the number of children varies significantly depending on the father's employment level, the influence is not as strong as it is for the mother. These findings imply that, in comparison to their husbands, the work status of CRMF moms has a greater influence on the size of their families. This finding may be a reflection of the crucial role that women's employment plays in family planning and childbearing decisions within CRMFs. This finding is consistent with research indicating that women's economic autonomy and employment possibilities are more closely related to fertility decisions because working women may have more control over their family planning options and access to reproductive health information.

4.4 Data Limitations and Methodological Considerations

While this dissertation provides systematic documentation of CRMF characteristics across 497 families in Narnaul, several significant data limitations limit the depth and scope of the analysis. These limitations reflect both methodological challenges inherent in studying marginalized populations and practical constraints of conducting extensive household research as an individual investigator rather than through institutional frameworks with dedicated survey teams.

The most substantial data gap concerns educational attainment among CRMF fathers. Despite multiple attempts across survey visits, educational data for male household heads could not be systematically collected due to their frequent absence during fieldwork periods. When present, many CRMF fathers were reluctant to discuss personal background details with an external researcher (the female fieldworker in this case). More concerning, however, was the discovery that CRMF mothers often possessed limited or no knowledge about their husbands' educational backgrounds, even in marriages of several years' duration. This absence of basic biographical knowledge between spouses proved revealing in itself, suggesting patterns of limited communication about personal histories and potentially indicating broader social distance within these unions. Such findings align with feminist scholarship on patriarchal marriage structures, where women's knowledge of their husbands' backgrounds may be deliberately restricted or considered irrelevant to their domestic roles (Ashraf & Jepsen, 2024).

Another significant limitation of this project concerns the collection of caste data from CRMF mothers. The primary obstacle was the considerable resistance from them when asked about their natal caste. Many of them were reluctant to disclose this information, likely due to the persistent stigma associated with lower-caste identities and the social pressure to assimilate into their marital family's caste hierarchy (Manisha & Ankit, 2024). This reluctance appeared to be reinforced by spousal and in-law expectations, as CRMF husbands frequently intervened during interviews to assert that their wives belonged to the same caste as the marital family, often questioning the relevance of asking about premarital caste identity. Additionally, in instances where participants did provide caste information, both the field worker and I encountered difficulties in accurately interpreting and categorizing the responses. The regional caste nomenclature was often unfamiliar to us, making it challenging to decode the specific caste affiliations mentioned by respondents. This linguistic and cultural barrier further complicated our data collection efforts. Given these substantial obstacles and the evident discomfort, it caused participants, I had to make the methodological decision to discontinue direct questioning about their original caste identities partway through the data collection process. While this limitation affects my ability to conduct certain caste-based analyses, it reflects the complex social dynamics and sensitivities surrounding caste identity in contemporary marital contexts.

The survey instrument also failed to capture child sex ratios (CSR) or gender composition within CRMF households, representing a significant analytical limitation given extensive research documenting son preference pattern across North India. This oversight prevents examination of whether CRMFs exhibit differential treatment of male and female children, sex-selective practices, or varying investments in sons versus daughters, which are all critical factors influencing marriage strategies and daughters' future prospects. The absence of gender-disaggregated child data also limits analysis of how parental concerns about marriage prospects might vary by child gender, a key dimension of the marriage market dynamics this research seeks to understand.

Economic data collection faced multiple constraints that limit precision in assessing household vulnerability. The survey captured employment categories but not detailed income information, preventing nuanced analysis of economic security or seasonal income variations common in agricultural and informal labor sectors where most CRMF fathers work. Data on asset ownership, land access, property rights, and extended family economic support

networks were not systematically gathered, yet these factors significantly influence families' capacity to arrange marriages and meet traditional marriage expenses. Length of employment tenure, job security, and employment history, variables crucial for understanding economic stability, were not documented due to time constraints and respondent reluctance to provide detailed economic information to unfamiliar researchers. Missing data on natal family economic circumstances represents another analytical limitation. While the survey documented geographic origins and maintenance of natal kin contact, it did not gather systematic information about natal families' economic status, landholding patterns, or capacity to provide support during crises. Such data would illuminate the extent to which CRMF mothers' vulnerabilities stem from natal family poverty versus post-marriage circumstances and would clarify whether natal families could potentially assist with future marriage arrangements for grandchildren.

The cross-sectional nature of data collection prevents analysis of changes over time in CRMF circumstances, marriage patterns, or adaptive strategies. Longitudinal data would reveal whether newer CRMFs face different challenges than those established decades ago, how families' circumstances change over marriage duration, and whether community integration improves with time. Such temporal analysis would be particularly valuable for understanding whether the disadvantages documented here represent temporary adjustment challenges or persistent structural exclusions. Finally, the absence of comparison data from RMFs within the same villages limits the capacity to definitively attribute observed patterns to CRMs status versus broader rural poverty or regional economic constraints. While existing research provides some comparative context, direct comparison with local families would strengthen claims about CRMF-specific vulnerabilities.

Despite these limitations, the data gathered provide unprecedented systematic documentation of CRMF characteristics and establish clear patterns of disadvantage across multiple domains. The limitations identified here suggest productive directions for future research employing institutional resources, longitudinal designs, and comparative frameworks. More importantly, the patterns documented remain robust enough to support the interpretive analysis that follows and to establish CRMFs as a population facing distinctive challenges requiring targeted policy attention and support.

Conclusion

This chapter has documented the socio-economic characteristics of 497 CRMFs in Narnaul, establishing a foundation of systematic disadvantage that shapes these families' lived experiences. The findings reveal multiple, intersecting vulnerabilities that distinguish CRMFs from families formed through RMs.

CRMF mothers originate from across India, with over half (51.7%) coming from Uttar Pradesh, followed by significant populations from Bihar, Assam, and West Bengal. Critically, 98.6% traveled more than 500 kilometers for marriage, creating substantial geographic barriers to natal family support. This distance represents more than physical separation; it constitutes a fundamental rupture in social networks that typically provide economic, emotional, and practical assistance during crises. The data reveals patterns around marriage timing and age structures. CRMF mothers married young (mean age 19.8 years), with 27% marrying before the legal age of 18, and transitioned rapidly to motherhood (mean age at first birth 21.6 years). The substantial age gaps between spouses (average difference approximately 7 years) compound power imbalances within marriages. These demographic patterns reflect limited agencies in marriage timing and family formation decisions.

Educational attainment among CRMF mothers is severely constrained, with a mean level of 1.81 (between primary and middle school), and 28.3% having no formal education. This educational disadvantage translates directly into economic exclusion; over 95% are not employed in formal sectors, limiting them to informal activities like cattle rearing and tailoring. The statistical analyses confirm that higher education correlates with delayed marriage age and smaller family sizes, yet most CRMF mothers lack access to such educational opportunities. While no significant association exists between caste and CRMF mothers' educational or employment outcomes, CRMF fathers show strong caste-employment correlations, suggesting that traditional occupational networks operate for men but not women. This gender differential indicates that women's economic marginalization cuts across caste boundaries, reflecting structural constraints rather than caste-specific disadvantages.

Perhaps most critically, CRMF mothers face severe social capital constraints. Although 93% maintain telephone contact with natal families, only 4% participate in self-help groups, the primary institutional mechanism for women's economic and social empowerment in rural India. This isolation from formal support networks compounds their vulnerabilities and limits access to resources, information, and collective action opportunities.

The regression analyses demonstrate that maternal age and education significantly predict family size, while employment status influences fertility patterns. These findings suggest that the disadvantages documented here will likely transmit intergenerationally, as limited parental resources—educational, economic, and social—constrain the opportunities available to CRMF children.

The patterns documented in this chapter establish CRMFs as a distinctly vulnerable population facing systematic disadvantages across multiple domains. The convergence of geographic isolation, educational deprivation, economic marginalization, and social capital deficits creates compound disadvantages where multiple forms of exclusion reinforce each other. These material conditions provide the essential context for understanding how CRMF parents navigate their children's marriageability, among others, which forms the focus of the qualitative analysis in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Social Evaluation in Practice: Stakeholder Assessments of CRMFs and Emerging Adults' Marriageability

The positioning of CRMFs within local social hierarchies and their children's marriageability emerge through complex processes of social evaluation that operate across multiple social spheres. This chapter examines how different social actors systematically assess CRMFs and their children's marriageability, revealing the mechanisms through which social worth, belonging, and positioning are constructed and negotiated within rural North Indian communities. Drawing on Lamont's (2012) framework of social evaluation, the analysis demonstrates how judgments about families are not uniform community responses but rather distinct evaluative processes that reflect different forms of embeddedness, institutional positioning, and social responsibilities.

The examination reveals three fundamentally different approaches to evaluating CRMFs. Parents within these families engage in what this doctoral dissertation terms "anticipatory social evaluation," acute projections of how their children will be assessed by potential marriage partners and their families while simultaneously working to position their children advantageously within local marriage markets. Sarpanches evaluate "sympathetic stratification" that maintains hierarchical differentiation while enabling conditional inclusion of CRMFs through graduated belonging mechanisms. Government officials exhibit "administrative distance" that reflects institutional frameworks rather than personal attitudes, with their responses shaped primarily by local embeddedness versus bureaucratic posting patterns.

These differential approaches illuminate how social evaluation operates across multiple levels of social organization while demonstrating the complex mechanisms through which demographic transitions are negotiated within traditional social systems.

5.1 Through Parental Eyes: Anticipatory Social Evaluation and Strategic Accommodation in CRMFs

Interviews with CRMF parents revealed how their personal experiences of social exclusion, lack of social and cultural capitals, cultural adaptation, and economic constraints fundamentally shaped their understanding of their children's marriageability prospects. They demonstrated acute awareness that their children would inherit both the advantages and disadvantages stemming from their family's cross-regional origins, leading to complex calculations about how to position them advantageously within local marriage markets.

Through their narratives, they engaged in what can be characterized as "anticipatory social evaluation" (Franks & Gecas, 1992), the process of predicting and preparing for how their children would be assessed by potential marriage partners and their families. Drawing on Lamont's (2012) concept of social evaluation, this anticipatory work extends their current experiences of marginalization into projections of future matrimonial constraints for children who have yet to reach adolescence or emerging adulthood. The process drew heavily from their experiences of being evaluated as "inside outsiders" (Kukreja, 2018a), their ongoing struggles with economic precarity and cultural adaptation, and their nuanced understanding of contemporary marriage market dynamics that increasingly prioritize educational credentials and employment security. While their children remain predominantly young, with a mean age of 6.348 years and 48% under age 4, they already engage in the anticipatory social evaluation processes. This early engagement with matrimonial planning reflects not merely parental anxiety but rather strategic recognition that social positioning work must begin years before actual marriage negotiations commence. Family reputation, economic positioning, and cultural integration unfold across extended timelines that ultimately determine children's marriageability prospects, requiring them to think and act with remarkable temporal foresight in their daily parenting decisions.

The analysis reveals four interconnected dimensions of this parental anticipatory positioning. First, mothers' personal narratives became strategic tools for understanding their children's prospects, transforming individual experiences into interpretive frameworks. Second, both parents recognized the intergenerational transmission of marginalization that flows from cross-regional origins, acknowledging how their own positioning would inevitably influence their children's social standing. Third, educational support constraints created significant barriers to the upward mobility that parents desperately sought for their children. Fourth, parents continuously navigated the tension between conventional matrimonial ideals and pragmatic accommodation to contemporary realities. Together, these dimensions illuminate the complex strategic work that CRMF parents performed while attempting to optimize their children's matrimonial outcomes and simultaneously managing the inherited consequences of their own unconventional marriage choices.

5.1.1 Mothers' Narrative Identity as a Lens on Children's Marriageability

The interviews with CRMF mothers revealed how their life stories became powerful lenses through which they understood and anticipated their children's marriageability. Drawing on

McAdams' (2001) concept of narrative identity, the ongoing life story that provides meaning and continuity to experience, I found that mothers weave together their experiences of marriage-led migration and cultural adaptation challenges into coherent narratives that directly shaped how they assessed their children's marriage prospects. These maternal narratives functioned as more than personal reflections. They became active tools for understanding social hierarchies and managing how their families were positioned within local marriage markets. When they recounted experiences of language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, or discrimination, they transformed these personal struggles into strategic frameworks for anticipating what their children might face. Jagriti's (M6) story illustrates this transformation clearly:

> I know what it feels like when you don't know the language, the customs... when you're always wrong in their eyes. I was educated, and I passed secondary, but after marriage, what use was it? I had to forget everything and just have children quickly. They used to beat me for not knowing their way. Now when I see my children, I worry and ask if they will face the same. I want them to be strong in studies, so nobody can make them feel small like they made me feel. Education should protect them from what I went through.

Her narrative demonstrates how mothers used their own experiences of marginalization to develop predictive insights about their children's futures. She understood that social positioning operates across generations, with her personal struggles providing intimate knowledge of processes her children will likely encounter. While acknowledging persistent barriers, mothers engaged in strategic narrative work that attempted to reshape how people perceived their families. This strategic emphasis reflected an understanding that social evaluation processes could be influenced through careful presentation, even while recognizing the power of established hierarchies. They understood that emphasizing their children's achievements or adaptability could serve as counter-narratives to potential stigma. Jaya's (M3) account demonstrates this strategic approach:

> My elder son is very intelligent, as when he was in government school, he always came first in his class. The teachers themselves told us, 'This boy is so bright; you should put him in a better school for higher education. he will go very far.' You see, it doesn't matter where we come from, as my child's merit speaks for itself. When teachers praise him like this, when he tops the class, nobody can say anything about our background.

Her narrative revealed deliberate efforts to transform existing evaluative criteria by countering the potential stigma associated with their distant regional origins and emphasized merit and achievement. This approach showed how they understood that highlighting their children's individual accomplishments could potentially influence how their families were assessed within local marriage markets. The strategic use of third-party validation, teachers' praise, added legitimacy to their claims while deflecting potential criticism about parental bias. However, they also demonstrated realistic awareness of structural constraints that their children would inherit regardless of individual merit or family efforts. They acknowledged significant barriers, including economic limitations, entrenched social hierarchies, and community prejudices that would continue to affect their children's prospects. Umesh's (M7) reflection captures this harsh reality:

> I'm terrified that my two daughters will marry early, just like I did. I was married at 17, and now I'm 25 with two children already. What do we have to do to educate them properly? We lack everything: a satisfying job and a stable family situation. While we are eager to provide them with education, we need to consider where the funding will come from. Without financial resources and support, how far can we realistically advance their progress?

Her narrative showed how economic constraints intersected with their "outsider" status to create compound disadvantages that would likely affect her daughters' futures. This intergenerational cycle she described, early marriage leading to limited resources leading to early marriage for the next generation, illustrated how structural barriers operated across time to constrain opportunities for the next generation. Some mothers strategically leveraged their cross-regional backgrounds as a potential advantage, framing their outsider statuses as representing superior qualities benefiting their children. This strategic reframing often involved complex intersectional positioning that simultaneously claimed higher status while acknowledging local misrecognition. Kishori's (M14) approach demonstrated this thinking clearly:

> I am not like local RMF mothers who cannot even go to markets on their own; they are dependent on their husbands for everything. I can even go to Karnataka on my own. And let me tell you, I had a proper marriage back there and I even come from a higher caste; the only thing is that people here do not understand. But when it comes to my children's marriage, I will make everyone understand.

Her narrative showed an understanding of how different audiences might value different aspects of their background. By positioning herself as more independent and higher status than local RMF mothers, she attempted to create a competitive advantage for her children in the marriage market. Her narrative also revealed how their cross-regional origins intersected with gender roles, caste hierarchies, and cultural capitals to create complex matrices of advantages and disadvantages that required strategic navigation. Yet mothers also recognized how multiple disadvantages could intersect to compound their children's challenges, particularly when traditional markers of status failed to translate into contemporary advantages. The intersection of regional outsider status with economic constraints and changing matrimonial preferences created particularly complex challenges. Writu's (M11) account illustrates how traditional advantages could become insufficient when combined with economic limitations:

> Even though we are an Ahir family, what does it matter now? We only have agricultural land; that's all we can offer. My stepson and my son both work in the fields. In today's time, who wants a farmer's son? Girls' families want government jobs, business, and money, not someone who works with mud and crops.

Her narrative demonstrated a clear understanding that contemporary marriage markets increasingly prioritized economic potentials and securities over traditional caste hierarchies. The intersection of her distant regional origin with agricultural occupation and economic constraints created what she recognized as insurmountable disadvantages for her sons.

In multiple ways, their narrative stories revealed how they simultaneously internalized, critically assessed, and strategically navigated systems of social evaluations. Their stories further showed how personal experiences with marginalization equipped them with predictive insights about the challenges their children would face while also providing frameworks for potentially influencing these evaluative processes. These narratives functioned as both protective mechanisms and strategic tools as ways of making sense of past experiences while anticipating and preparing for future challenges. They engaged in a complex process of transforming personal experiences of marginalization into resources for anticipating and potentially influencing the processes that would affect their children's matrimonial futures. It further illustrated how they strategically used their life stories not just for personal reflections but as active tools to manage social positioning across generations, functioning in three ways: first, transforming personal experiences of marginalization into

predictive knowledge about social hierarchies and evaluative processes; second, presenting family narratives that highlight strengths while recognizing constraints; and third, preparing children to navigate similar evaluative systems through education, cultural adaptation, and identity development.

5.1.2 Intergenerational Echoes of Marginality and The Legacy of Cross-Regional Origin

The interviews with CRMF parents demonstrated that their children would be evaluated through the lens of family positioning rather than individual merits alone, with an understanding that in rural North Indian contexts, marriage functioned as a transaction between families, with evaluations of paternal occupation, reputation, landholding, and accumulated assets making the perceived "worth" of kinship groups paramount in determining matrimonial outcomes. Umakant (F7) articulated this connection explicitly: "We already do not own land, and if no one has a job in our family, it will become very difficult to sustain. Without work, how will our children be considered suitable matches?" It reflected broader recognition that material resources functioned as "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1986) that traveled with children into marriage negotiations, where visible signs of prosperity or decline become primary evaluative criteria. The intersection of economic constraints with demographic realities created particular anxieties among fathers who understood that their advanced age at marriage would compound their children's matrimonial challenges. Manoj (F1) explained how the substantial age gap with his wife created temporal concerns:

> I am already getting old, with about a fifteen-year age gap between my wife and me, as I married late. By the time my child grows into an emerging adult, I will be much older. In such cases, the girl's family may think that the boy's father cannot provide economic or employment support.

These temporal anxieties meant that matrimonial evaluations operated through projective assessments of family stability and economic capacity that extended beyond current circumstances to anticipate future vulnerabilities. They realized that their demographic positioning would create inherited disadvantages for their children in marriage markets where family stability and long-term economic prospects were primary considerations. CRMF mothers similarly linked economic precarity to diminished marriage prospects but frequently framed these concerns through frameworks of social comparison and community evaluation that emphasized relational positioning within local hierarchies as a

social marker that signaled family status and respectability within community networks. This community assessment often manifested publicly, as when one CRB gave birth to twin girls after already having a daughter, the entire village expressed sympathy about how the already poor family would feed, clothe, and marry three daughters. Such community responses, while seemingly compassionate, reinforced perceptions of economic burden and matrimonial disadvantage. Washundra (M17) captured: "If the father is old and not working, people say the family is finished." The economic circumstances seemed translated into broader assessments of family viability within local community.

The economic concerns articulated by both mothers and fathers were systematically compounded by the stigma attached to mothers' cross-regional origins, creating additional layers of matrimonial disadvantage that operated through frameworks of caste speculation and lineage uncertainty. In the absence of shared kinship networks or verifiable genealogical connections within local communities, many CRMF mothers became subjects of community speculation about their caste backgrounds. Kishori (M14) described this dynamic: "People say, 'We don't know her people, so she must be from a low caste.' Even if it is not true, once they say it, it spreads. Now, how do I tell them I belong to a caste even higher than theirs? They just do not understand." This suspicion surrounding mothers' origins transmitted stigma that both parents understood would systematically affect their children's evaluation as potential marriage partners within local matrimonial networks. CRMF fathers recognized this dynamic as creating permanent features of family social positioning that remained resistant to change across generations, with mothers' outsider status functioning as a structural disadvantage in marriage markets. Jugal Kishore (F6) also articulated this intergenerational burden:

> My children are still young, but I know what they will face when it's time for their marriage. People here will ask questions about their mother, where she comes from, what her customs are, and whether she knows our ways properly. Unless my children become very successful, they will always have to answer for their mother's cross-regional background. The boy might be good, earning well, but if the mother is outsider, people start thinking, 'What kind of family is this?' It's not fair, but that's the reality. My children will carry this burden, as they didn't choose where their mother comes from, but they will have to prove themselves because of it.

The absence of extended kinship networks meant fewer allies to counter negative narratives while allowing rumors to circulate unchecked. His wife, Jagriti's (M6), experiences within the same household demonstrated how these intergenerational concerns manifested differently for mothers and fathers. Both understood that the marginalization experienced by CRMF mothers often stemmed from constrained choices that led to CRM as a necessity rather than a preference. Economic pressures and family circumstances had forced them into geographical displacement, making these marriages a last resort for those facing poverty or the risk of becoming financial burdens on their families. Washundra (M17) recalled her decision-making process:

> When my husband was staying near my home in Bengal, I talked to him, and he told me that he would take care of me, and I would be way better off in Haryana than here. I asked my parents to marry him, and they allowed me to. They were pleased that at least I did not become a burden on them any further, as I also had three more sisters still to be married off.

The economic motivations underlying CRMs created additional stigma that both parents recognized would affect family positioning, as community members often understood these arrangements as reflecting desperation rather than choice. Mangla (M1) explained:

> I married in Haryana, far away from Maharashtra, because my family was poor and was unable to give a dowry for marriages locally. My elder cousin married a few years ago in Haryana and my brother-in-law arranged a dowry-less marriage for me as well. But if my family had some money, I would have married in Maharashtra only.

The cultural adaptation challenges faced by CRMF mothers created additional layers of marginalization and language barriers emerged as fundamental challenges that affected their capacity for social integration and community participation, with implications for the entire family's social standing. Arti (M13) described her linguistic challenges:

> I did not understand anything when I arrived here. Everyone would speak Haryanvi, and I did not even speak Hindi then. So first I learned Hindi and then slowly started speaking Haryanvi. It took me more than a couple of years to learn to do so.

The temporal investment required for linguistic adaptation created extended periods of social isolation with communication barriers limiting mothers' capacity to develop supportive relationships that could benefit their children's future matrimonial prospects. Cultural adaptation extended to fundamental lifestyle changes, including dietary practices, clothing norms, and behavioral expectations that required substantial personal transformation. Kishori (M14) described her adjustment to local dress codes:

> I was not familiar with ghunghat when I arrived here. I used to go out without wearing a headscarf, and then other local women from RM would scoff and ask me to wear it. Even my mother-in-law got angry with me many times when any men visited our home and if I did not have the ghunghat on. These adaptation requirements created ongoing pressure for cultural conformity, which both parents recognized as impacting their families' social standing and their children's future marriage prospects in local markets.

The household dynamics experienced by CRMF mothers further revealed complex power structures with limited decision-making authority experienced by them affected their capacity to advocate for their children's interests and matrimonial prospects. Arti (M13) articulated her powerlessness clearly: "I do not think I have any decision-making power at my home. No one really asks me for anything. It is my mother-in-law who makes most decisions at home. She even abuses me for nothing." The exclusion of many CRMF mothers from local support networks and organizational structures exacerbated their social isolation. Arti (M13) further reflected on this isolation:

> Back in Assam, even my old mother is a part of a local self-help group where they save every week and help each other at the time of any crisis. Here there is no such group, and we are confined to our houses.

CRMF mothers, despite marginalization, developed realistic strategies for resistance and adaptation that revealed their agency in navigating constraining circumstances. The transformation from passive acceptance to active resistance emerged as a recurring theme that both parents recognized as crucial for family survival and positioning. This evolution is powerfully illustrated by Jagriti (M6), Jugal Kishore's (F6) wife, whose journey from victimization to empowerment within the same household demonstrates how resistance strategies develop over time. Jagriti (M6) exemplified this evolution:

> In the beginning, everyone at my in-laws would beat me. They took me for granted and knew that I had no one for my support and hence took me as vulnerable. But after a time, I started to fight back... I called for help from fellow neighborhood women, and they came to my rescue.

Some CRMF mothers established recruitment networks that created pathways for other women from their natal regions while simultaneously providing social support and cultural continuity within their new communities. They understood how these networks could potentially benefit their families' positioning going forward. Bulbul (M2) described her role in facilitating marriages: "I saw many girls from my village and nearby areas marrying in Haryana, and I was fascinated by the idea. I was recruited by a woman from my village who was already married in Narnaul, and when a favorable proposal came, I happily married. Now I have girls from my old village married in my new village whom I brought here."

It was clear that through their shared understanding of these complex dynamics, both CRMF mothers and fathers engaged in transforming their experiences of marginalization into predictive frameworks to anticipate and potentially manage the evaluative processes that could impact their children's matrimonial futures.

5.1.3 Educational Support Constraints and Their Impact

For CRMF parents, education emerged as the central paradox defining their aspirations for their children's future social mobility and matrimonial prospects. Across interviews, parents repeatedly emphasized that only through "good education" could their children secure respectable employment and improve their positioning within local marriage markets. However, profound constraints systematically undermined this educational imperative, leaving them unable to provide the academic support their children needed. Most CRMF parents had completed only middle school education, with many having dropped out earlier due to economic necessities or gendered restrictions on educational access. Their limited educational backgrounds functioned not merely as personal regrets but as structural barriers that fundamentally constrained their capacity to support their children's academic advancement. The tension between educational aspirations and practical limitations created an anxiety among those who understood that educational failure would compound their children's existing social disadvantages within local marriage markets. Their acute awareness of Haryana's severe employment crisis intensified this anxiety. The state's labor force

participation rate stands at just 33.2%, significantly lower than India's 40.1%, while the unemployment rate reaches 6.5% overall and a staggering 17.6% for youth aged 15–29, compared to the national youth unemployment rate of 15.0% (Bishnoi et al., 2024). Even neighboring states like Punjab (40.8%), Rajasthan (41.2%), and Himachal Pradesh (57.7%) demonstrate much higher rates of labor force participation than Haryana. Parents understood that this employment crisis had fundamentally altered marriage market criteria, where families now prioritized secure employment above traditional considerations, making educational excellence, not just completion, absolutely essential for their children's matrimonial prospects. Manoj (F1) articulated this helplessness at length:

> Both my wife and I have no proper education, and we are just laborers, doing daily wage work. We know education is crucial for our children's future; that's why we have sent them to the nearby government school. But the problem is, we are not equipped enough to support them properly. When they come home with homework and with questions, we cannot help them. We don't know English, and we don't know what they are teaching these days. Sometimes they ask us about their studies, but what can we tell them? We feel so helpless. We want to give them a good education, but we lack the knowledge to guide them. Other parents who are educated can sit with their children and help them with lessons. But we... we can only tell them, 'Study hard, go to school regularly.' Beyond that, what support can we give? We know this is a big disadvantage for our children.

This paradox between educational ideals and constrained reality characterized nearly every parental narrative, revealing how structural disadvantages operated across generations to limit social mobility opportunities while intensifying pressure on emerging adults to achieve educational success without adequate family support. CRMF fathers, particularly, consistently framed education as the singular viable pathway for escaping economic precarity and achieving social respectability. In households characterized by minimal landholdings and irregular employment, formal education was conceptualized as substitute for inherited economic capital that could provide their children with opportunities for dignified employment and improved matrimonial prospects. Umakant (F7) also explained this pressure:

> Our son has to study, study very hard, beat the competition as there's no other option for us. If he has to get a good government job, he must be better than everyone else.

> We don’t have land, we don’t have any property to give him, we don’t have business to hand over. We lack so many things that other families have. For us, education is the only way. I keep telling him that ‘You have to study harder than the rich children because they have backup, we don’t. If you don't get government job, what will you do? We have nothing else to offer you.’ Other fathers can say ‘Take over the shop, work on our fields,’ but what can I give him? Only books, only education. That’s why he must beat everyone in competition, get good marks, clear the exams. Education is our only asset.

Their narratives reflected recognition that traditional sources of economic security had become inadequate for ensuring social mobility, making educational achievement the primary mechanism through which CRMF children might transcend their families’ marginalized positioning. Yet parents also understood that their own educational limitations created profound gaps between their aspirations and their capacity to provide meaningful academic support. CRMF mothers experienced similar educational anxieties but faced additional constraints related to their outsider status, linguistic barriers, and limited social networks that compounded their inability to support their children's academic advancement. Many of them described their own truncated educational histories as sources of shame and helplessness that affected their confidence in advocating for their children’s educational needs. Their concerns were heightened by their understanding that without their support, children would struggle in competitive exams and other spheres of life essential for success in contemporary employment markets. Parents also recognized a cruel irony: they had witnessed many cases where poor education led to cycles of marginalization similar to their experiences, yet they lacked the resources needed to break these patterns for their children. They understood that only education could save their children from repeating their struggles but felt powerless to provide the support necessary for educational success. This created intense anxiety about whether their children could succeed in competitive environments without adequate family guidance. These intersecting constraints, educational, linguistic, and social, created profound isolation for mothers who desired to support their children's academic success but found themselves systematically excluded from the cultural knowledge and social networks necessary for effective educational advocacy.

Financial limitations emerged as critical barriers that systematically undermined CRMFs’ capacity to provide their children with quality educational opportunities, creating cascading disadvantages that affected academic performance and employment prospects.

Parents described ongoing struggles to afford tuition fees, uniforms, textbooks, and transportation expenses, with some children forced to transfer to lower-quality institutions due to economic constraints. These financial constraints created systematic disadvantages in academic competition, where CRMF children faced reduced access to quality instruction, supplementary tutoring, and educational resources that could enhance their competitiveness. The economic pressures affecting educational investment created feedback loops where constrained educational opportunities reduced employment prospects, which in turn diminished matrimonial attractiveness and perpetuated social marginalization across generations. Parents understood with painful clarity that without strong educational credentials, their children would struggle to secure stable employment, and without employment security, their matrimonial prospects would be systematically diminished within local marriage markets that increasingly prioritized economic stability and professional achievement. Wridha (M5) captured the overwhelming nature of these challenges:

> I want to help my children with their studies, but I lack the knowledge to educate them properly. My husband has been bedridden for some time now, so everything falls on me. I have to manage the house, take care of him, earn something for daily needs, and also think about children's education. When they come home from school with homework, I feel so helpless as I don't know how to guide them. I can barely read and write myself. Other mothers can sit with their children and help them with lessons, but what can I do? I'm struggling every day just to manage basic things: food, medicine for my husband, and school fees. I want my children to study well, to have a better future than us, but I don't have the knowledge or resources to support them properly. Sometimes I wonder if I am failing my children because I cannot help them the way they need.

Her account illustrates how multiple constraints converged to limit parents' capacity for educational support while intensifying their awareness of what their children needed but could not receive. The symbolic significance of educational credentials within contemporary marriage markets intensified parental anxieties while highlighting the transformation of matrimonial evaluation criteria that had made academic achievement central to social positioning and matrimonial desirability. Fathers recognized that educational qualifications had become primary screening criteria in marriage negotiations, preceding traditional considerations of caste background or family reputation. This shift toward educational credentialism in marriage markets created urgency among parents who understood the stakes

involved in their children's academic performance while feeling powerless to provide adequate support. The intersection of caste-based marginalization with educational disadvantage created additional layers of exclusion that CRMF children were required to navigate in pursuing academic achievement and employment opportunities. The combination of multiple disadvantages, caste position, economic constraints, and cross-regional origins required exceptional individual effort to overcome while providing limited institutional or community support for academic advancement. Bharat (F2) reflected on these compounding challenges:

> I am young, married for a short time only, and have no children yet. But I think about it every day and wonder, what will I be able to give my children? I come from the Chamar caste; I have left the traditional leather work to become a laborer. Right now, I earn enough for us, but I have an old mother to take care of; my wife also looks after her. When we have children, this earning will not be enough at all. Already we lack so many things that are needed in today's time: a good house, savings, and connections. Being from the Chamar community, we don't have the resources that other castes have. I am not sure what opportunities my child will have. Will they also have to struggle like me? Will people still look down on them because of our caste? I worry that even if I work hard, it won't be enough to give them a positive future. We are helpless in many ways.

His concerns reveal how parents understood that their children would inherit multiple disadvantages that would require exceptional educational achievement to overcome, yet they lacked the capacity to facilitate such achievement. The educational constraints experienced by CRMF parents extended beyond individual schooling challenges to encompass broader patterns of social reproduction that systematically limited opportunities for upward mobility and improved social positioning. Parents understood that educational failure would perpetuate their families' marginalized status while reducing their children's employment prospects and matrimonial desirability within local social hierarchies. This recognition created intense pressure for educational achievement while highlighting the structural barriers that made such achievement difficult to attain.

5.1.4 Parental Navigation of Ideal Preferences and Strategic Accommodation

CRMF parents revealed a profound paradox in their matrimonial preferences for their children: despite having themselves entered CRMs as responses to constrained local

opportunities, they expressed clear preferences for local, same-caste RMs for their children. This apparent contradiction illuminated their complex navigation between lived experience and social ideals, between pragmatic acceptance of their circumstances and aspirational conformity to conventional marriage norms. When discussing their children's future matrimonial arrangements, parents initially articulated strong preferences for traditional partnerships, viewing local matches as safer, more socially acceptable, and easier to facilitate through existing kinship networks. They positioned themselves as progressive and understanding, yet their first priority remained securing local unions for their children, arrangements they considered difficult but not impossible to achieve. This positioning reflected them simultaneously claiming progressive values while advocating for conventional outcomes. They wanted to be considered modern and flexible, different from rigid traditional parents, yet hoped their children would choose paths that aligned with community expectations. This duality emerged from their understanding that being perceived as progressive could enhance their family's social standing, while conventional matrimonial outcomes would ensure their children's acceptance and integration within local hierarchies. The preference for RMs was consistently framed through frameworks of ease and community acceptance. They emphasized how same-caste, same-region marriages required minimal explanation while avoiding the defensive positioning and community judgment that characterized their own matrimonial experiences. They believed this approach would spare their children and their partners from enduring what they had gone through. Warun (F5) articulated this preference:

> For my children's marriages, I will only look within our local community or region; that's it. No other unions, no outside matches. It's very simple for me. When you marry within your own people, everything is straightforward: the same customs, the same language, and the same regional understanding. The families know each other, the traditions match, no confusion, no problems. I have seen what happens when people marry outside as there will be so many complications, adjustments, and conflicts between families. Why create unnecessary troubles? Local marriages are accepted by everyone; no one questions anything. The children also feel comfortable; they don't have to explain their background or prove themselves to anyone. Our community has good families; why do we need to look elsewhere? Simple is always better.

It revealed how their personal experiences of navigating cultural differences led to an understanding of the social advantages linked to traditional marriage arrangements within established community networks and cultural frameworks. Their preference for simplicity reflected not just practical considerations but also their desire to spare their children the emotional labor of constantly proving their worth or defending their family's choices. They understood that local marriages provided the advantage of not having to justify or explain one's family background in social interactions.

CRMF mothers who had experienced marginalization as outsiders articulated particular concern about protecting their children from similar social challenges, with many explicitly connecting their preference for local matches to desires to shield their children from discrimination and cultural alienation. Mangla (M1) explained her protective stance:

> For my daughter, I will never allow her to face the same treatment that I have faced. I spent many years feeling like an outsider when I married into this family. Even when my parents were dying, I was not allowed to visit them, can you imagine? I could not even see them one last time. This pain, this treatment—I cannot accept the same fate for my girl child. That's why I will arrange her marriage only locally, within our community here. At least she will have respect, she will be accepted, and she won't be called "outsider" like they called me. In this community, people are familiar with our family and their background. She can visit us anytime; we can support her when needed. I don't want her to be isolated from her parents like I was. Local marriage means she stays close, gets respect, and no one treats her badly because of where she comes from.

The mothers' perspectives demonstrated how personal experiences of marginalization created both motivations to secure conventional matrimonial arrangements for their children and understanding of the social dynamics that could affect their children's acceptance within local community networks. However, beneath these stated preferences for conventional marriages lay more complex realities of conditional openness that reflected parents' pragmatic understanding of contemporary matrimonial constraints and their own positioning as enlightened individuals. Parents understood that if their children wanted to arrange marriages not per traditional norms, such as local inter-caste marriages or other non-conventional forms, they would be happy and accept these choices too. Their progressive positioning emerged in their willingness to support their children's decisions, provided the larger community did not object strongly. This conditional acceptance operated where parents

established hierarchies of acceptable departures from conventional norms. Local inter-caste marriages were completely unacceptable and not tolerated within their communities, as caste boundaries remained absolutely rigid regardless of geographical proximity (Chowdhry, 2004b). The least acceptable option was cross-regional inter-caste unions, which violated both geographical and caste norms simultaneously. Love marriages could be acceptable if they maintained caste boundaries and met other criteria such as educational or economic compatibility, while elopements were discouraged but might be reluctantly accepted if they resulted in stable unions within acceptable social parameters (Chowdhry, 2007).

Parents had developed complex mental matrices for evaluating matrimonial possibilities that balanced their children's happiness against anticipated social consequences, with caste endogamy representing the non-negotiable boundary that even progressive parents would not cross. Jitesh (F3) demonstrated this flexibility:

> I will be okay if my children want to marry just like me. I have had a happy marriage, and I consider myself progressive in my thinking. If my son or daughter finds a good person from another caste who is well-educated, has good job, and good character, then why should I object? Education and earning capacity matter more than caste these days. My children should have the freedom to choose, but they must be financially independent first. That's my condition, study well, get good job, then marry whoever makes you happy.

This hierarchical framework revealed their strategic calculations about optimizing their children's matrimonial outcomes while managing structural constraints. Many CRMF mothers themselves expressed openness to non-local matches, having navigated the challenges of being outsiders. They articulated specific conditions under which they would consider departures from conventional preferences: strong educational credentials could compensate for caste differences, secure employment could offset regional distance, and good character could balance other social disadvantages. Education and stable employment emerged as primary factors that could override traditional compatibility markers, reflecting broader transformations in matrimonial markets that increasingly prioritized economic security over conventional social positioning. Despite this private flexibility, parents consistently worried about social backlash and community disapproval. As one mother explained, "We would still prefer what the larger community wants, as otherwise living among them would be very difficult." This tension between private acceptance and public

conformity emerged as a recurring theme, with parents describing themselves as “walking a tightrope” between supporting their children and maintaining necessary social relationships in closely knit rural communities.

Parents recognized that accepting non-conventional marriages for one child could negatively affect matrimonial prospects for siblings by signaling family departure from traditional values. However, they also observed changing marriage norms around them, young people eloping when they disagreed with parental choices, successful challenges to parental authority, and generational shifts in matrimonial attitudes. These observations created uncertainty about future matrimonial landscapes and ambivalence about how much authority they could exercise over their children's decisions. The temporal dimension of changing norms created particular anxiety for parents with young children, who wondered whether current social frameworks would persist until their children reached marriageable age.

5.2 Marriageability in the Public Eye: Perspectives of Sarpanches

The perspectives of Sarpanches offered critical insights into how CRMFs and their children are positioned within local matrimonial markets. As representatives who regularly interact with local government officials, mediate community disputes, and shape village-level discourses, Sarpanches occupy a unique social position that allows them to influence broader community attitudes toward marriage norms and social belonging. Their evaluations of CRMFs revealed the complex mechanisms through which traditional communities navigate demographic pressures while attempting to preserve established social hierarchies.

This section of the chapter examines four key dimensions of Sarpanches’ perspectives on CRMs and their implications for children’s marriageability. First, it explores their paradoxical stance toward traditional marriage norm disruption, revealing greater concern over local love marriages than cross-regional arrangements. They engaged in “sympathetic stratification,” pragmatically accommodating these marriages while continuing to uphold caste-endogamous norms. Second, it analyzes their gendered understanding of marriageability pathways, showing how traditional beauty standards and economic expectations create different marriage prospects for men and women. Third, it investigates the institutional constraints that limit their capacity to support CRMFs despite their sympathetic discourse. Finally, it examines how Sarpanches’ own narrative identities as village-elected leaders shape their evaluative approaches, demonstrating how personal stories

about effective leadership influence their assessments of marriageability and family positioning.

5.2.1 Compulsion, but Norm Disruption

The Sarpanches interviewed across the Narnaul region revealed a profoundly complex and paradoxical stance toward CRMs and the evolving matrimonial practices among emerging adults. Their perspectives illuminated a fundamental tension between pragmatic accommodation of demographic realities and deep-seated anxieties about the erosion of traditional marriage norms. While these community gatekeepers acknowledged the practical necessity of CRM arrangements due to stark demographic imbalances, they simultaneously expressed concerns about the broader deterioration of customary marriage norms and the dissolution of carefully maintained caste-and gotra-boundaries that have historically structured their communities' entire social fabric. This possibility illustrated a distinctly hierarchical approach to their concerns regarding matrimonial norm disruption, revealing that their anxieties were not uniformly distributed across all forms of non-traditional marriage practices. Such strategic accommodation also reflected broader patterns of institutional adaptation, wherein traditional social structures incorporated limited exceptions to ensure their long-term preservation and legitimacy. Consequently, sympathetic stratification functioned as a form of institutional resilience that permitted surface-level flexibility while maintaining the structural integrity of caste-based social organization. Rather than viewing CRMs as the primary threat to social stability, they expressed significantly greater alarm over the increasing prevalence of local love marriages and inter-caste unions within their immediate villages. As Ramratan (S2) explained: "Our village society has fallen so low that parents who raise their children, nurture them into adults, find themselves betrayed by these very children who bring shame to their families and villages by running away for so-called love marriages. They go outside in the name of studies, but instead they fall in love, find a girl, get involved with her, and then marry without looking at the caste or community of the girl or considering the reputation of her family. Unfortunately, their numbers are increasing every day." They consistently reported observing a disturbing trend of young adults "running away from their families in Narnaul for marriages that their families and villages did not approve of," describing these incidents with a palpable sense of betrayal and loss of authority. These elopements represented more than individual acts of rebellion; they constituted fundamental challenges to the traditional patriarchal structures that have historically governed

matrimonial decision-making processes in these communities. CRMs, while representing departures from traditional endogamous practices, been rationalized as responses to external demographic pressures beyond "community control." Local love marriages and inter-caste unions, however, represented internal challenges to authority structures and social hierarchies that Sarpanches felt duty-bound to preserve. Pradeep Kumar (S1) expressed this distinction clearly: "What makes accepting CRMs straightforward? These women are poor, and if they marry in their region, they will forever remain poor. They come here (to Haryana) and have a far better life. They also address the issue of insufficient women available for marriage. But the local inter-caste love marriages bring shame to the family. They do not fit into the marriage norms." This distinction illuminated how they navigated the competing pressures of demographic necessity and social control, revealing their strategic approach to managing change while attempting to preserve their positions of authority.

The discourse surrounding bride shortage among them further revealed contradictions and conceptual gaps in their understanding of gender issues and demographic dynamics. While unanimously acknowledging the acute scarcity of marriageable women in the region, their articulation of this crisis demonstrated a troubling disconnect between recognition of the problem and comprehension of its underlying causes. When pressed for specific strategies or concrete proposals for improving sex ratios in their communities, they exhibited a complete absence of meaningful solutions or genuine commitment to addressing the systematic devaluation of female children that has created this demographic crisis at the first place. Their responses typically devolved into vague platitudes about "saving girls" without demonstrating any understanding of the complex web of cultural practices, economic incentives, and social structures that have historically disadvantaged female children. Raju (S9) captured this helplessness when he said, "What can governments do? They have launched several campaigns, such as *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*. If people do not want girls, then what can they do? I don't know what anyone can do; maybe this region will always be like this. Panchayats cannot do anything." This disconnection between symptom recognition and causal analysis suggested that their acceptance of CRMs stemmed more from pragmatic accommodation and lack of other options than from any genuine commitment to addressing the underlying gender inequities that have created the need for such arrangements.

Their evaluation of CRMFs revealed deep-rooted ideas about social hierarchy, marriageability in terms of right age and place, and community status that continue to shape

how they understand matrimonial success and failure. They consistently positioned CRMs as last-resort matrimonial strategies, used by men who had failed to secure marriages within their local networks due to various personal, economic, and social deficiencies, and thus were categorized as the "unmarriageable men." Anshi's husband (S19), speaking as the "Sarpanch representative" on her behalf, explained: "Those who drink, did not study well, have no job, or do nothing at all are the ones who do not get married here. The lack of women is only a problem for them. The ones with good families find girls easily. There is a queue of girls waiting to marry them." According to this assessment, men who pursued CRMs typically suffered from one or more critical deficiencies: insufficient land ownership, inadequate educational credentials, unstable employment situations, compromised social reputations, or limited socio-cultural capital that would make them attractive marriage partners within local matrimonial markets. This approach to judging CRMFs worked in several ways for them including the local village communities. It offered a respectable reason for CRMs that kept up the appearance of free choice while covering up the real demographic pressures behind these marriages. Simultaneously, this framework reinforced existing social stratifications by attributing matrimonial difficulties to individual inadequacies rather than acknowledging the systematic demographic pressures affecting the entire region. By maintaining that "successful" men with adequate resources and social and cultural capitals could still secure local RMs, Sarpanches preserved the illusion that traditional matrimonial systems remained viable and functional for those who deserved their benefits. The persistence of traditional matchmaking priorities and status considerations, even within the context of demographically necessitated CRMs, demonstrated the remarkable resilience of social hierarchies in the face of structural pressures for change. It also signified that caste-and gotra-based traditional considerations continued to play significant roles in matrimonial decision-making. Ganesh (S5) reflected:

> The ideal marriage is the one that our ancestors fixed regulations for and following those regulations of marrying locally in the same caste with different gotras. All the rest is just norm disruption. Some of them we have to accept, as we do not have any other choices.

The tension between practical necessity and normative preservation created a complex matrimonial landscape characterized by simultaneous acceptance and stigmatization of CRMs. These unions were acknowledged as inevitable responses to demographic realities

while being consistently positioned as outcomes that reflected various forms of individual or familial failure. This dual characterization allowed Sarpanches to maintain their commitment to traditional values and hierarchical structures while accommodating the practical realities that made strict adherence to these values impossible for many families.

5.2.2 Gendered pathways to Marriageability given Universal Job Scarcity

The Sarpanches interviewed across the Narnaul region articulated their gendered understandings of marriageability, revealing how traditional gender hierarchies intersected with contemporary economic realities to create divergent pathways to marriage for boys and girls. It illuminated a complex landscape where universal job scarcity differentially impacted matrimonial opportunities based on gender, creating distinct challenges and possibilities that reflected deeply embedded assumptions about masculine and feminine roles in marriage markets. They consistently emphasized that women's matrimonial prospects remained fundamentally secure despite the broader economic challenges facing their communities, showing a confidence in female marriageability that stood in stark contrast to their anxieties about men's matrimonial futures.

According to their assessment, girls from their communities possessed inherent advantages in marriage markets that went beyond economic considerations, with certain physical and educational attributes serving as particularly valuable matrimonial assets. Shubhkaran (S3) explained, "The ones with fair skin and who are educated and from decent families will get married easily. Other girls can marry too, but it may take longer or require compromise. I have seen this happening in other regions too." Many other Sarpanches echoed this view, particularly highlighting fair skin as a crucial factor in female marriageability, reflecting the persistence of colorist preferences that continue to shape matrimonial decisions across North Indian marriage markets. It revealed how traditional beauty standards intersected with educational qualifications to create a hierarchy of female marriageability, where fair-skinned, educated women from respectable families occupied the top tier, while others faced longer searches or greater compromises but ultimately retained decent marriage prospects. Their persistent optimism about female matrimonial prospects reflected deeply held beliefs about gender roles and marriage markets, where women's value was understood to come from their capacity to fulfill domestic and reproductive functions rather than their economic productivity.

In stark contrast to their confidence about female matrimonial prospects, they expressed anxieties about the increasingly precarious matrimonial situation facing boys in their communities. They consistently emphasized that boys' access to marriage had become contingent upon securing stable and well-remunerated employment, creating matrimonial barriers that many young of them found impossible to surmount given the limited economic opportunities available in the region. Jitendra (S21) captured this difficulty:

> Boys will find it very difficult. I have seen one or two cases where they have not been able to get married despite having jobs. They look different, you know, as one can identify them just by looking at them. Even if somebody hides their mother's background, other people will tell the marriage party that their father married in such and such fashion. I don't think people are going to arrange marriages for their children with such boys. These days, even boys from typical families are not getting married; let's not consider them.

This gendered differentiation in matrimonial requirements reflected traditional expectations that men serve as primary economic providers within marital relationships, expectations that had become increasingly difficult to fulfill given the broader economic stagnation affecting rural North India. They painted a particularly dire picture of masculine matrimonial prospects, describing a growing crisis of unmarried men that had reached alarming proportions across their local communities revealing the scale of this demographic and social crisis, with virtually every village reporting substantial populations of unmarried men who had passed well beyond the conventional marriageable ages. Sandeep (S10) described the regional extent of this problem: "I know at least five or six villages nearby where more than 100 unmarried men are looking for marriage proposals, even coming from good families. This is the stark reality of our times, but this has to do with the entire region and lack of girls. If people have more girls, only in the future will it not be a problem." Many of them shared similar concerns about the growing numbers of unmarried men in their thirties, describing it as an unprecedented social challenge that affected even families with good reputations and adequate resources. This demographic reality represented a fundamental shift in rural social structure, where the traditional expectation that all men would eventually marry has become increasingly unrealistic. The accumulation of unmarried men across the region constituted more than individual tragedies; it represented a fundamental challenge to the social reproduction of their communities and the maintenance of traditional family

structures, forcing Sarpanches to confront the limitations of conventional matrimonial systems in addressing contemporary demographic and economic realities.

Faced with this mounting crisis of unmarried men, Sarpanches had begun to acknowledge that CRMs represented not merely individual solutions but systematic responses to structural demographic and economic pressures. Their discourse revealed a reluctant acceptance that these matrimonial arrangements would become increasingly necessary as traditional marriage markets continued to fail substantial portions of their male populations. Several of them expressed similar views about the inevitable normalization of CRMs, predicting that their social acceptance would increase as their prevalence grew and their necessity became more apparent to community members. This anticipated normalization process reflected their understanding that social norms typically adapt to accommodate widespread practices that serve essential community functions. Many noted that villages with higher concentrations of CRMs showed greater acceptance of such arrangements, suggesting that familiarity breeds tolerance and eventually normalization. However, their optimism about increasing acceptance of CRMs was tempered by significant uncertainties about the long-term social integration of families formed through these arrangements, particularly regarding the status and acceptance of children born in CRMFs. Discussions with them revealed considerable ambivalence and disagreement within their communities about how to categorize and treat the offspring of marriages that crossed traditional geographical and cultural boundaries. An older community member with a significant reputation in his village and surrounding area reflected this uncertainty:

> See, we do not have too many children from such families yet. We observe that unmarried young men are having difficulty finding partners to marry, so they seek relationships outside their immediate community. Only in the future are children from such marriage families going to appear. Maybe they are in some areas, but not here. So, we do not know what will happen to them. What will happen? If they find good jobs, study well, and shift to cities, they will get married, or they will marry by their choice.

Many Sarpanches expressed similar concerns about the unknown future of CRMFs, revealing a community-wide struggle to predict how traditional social hierarchies would accommodate children whose mothers came from different regions and cultural backgrounds. The variation in community responses highlighted an ongoing negotiation process through which traditional communities adapt to changing demographic realities while attempting to

preserve essential elements of their cultural identity. This uneven acceptance suggested that the normalization of CRMs will likely proceed differently across localities, influenced by local histories, leadership attitudes, and the proportion of such marriages within specific villages. Their perspectives certainly revealed a community leadership caught between maintaining traditional authority and acknowledging the practical limitations of conventional marriage systems, forced to sanction arrangements they would have previously rejected while still attempting to preserve hierarchical distinctions that maintain their social order.

However, the deeper sources of resistance to CRMs became apparent through conversations with local women, who articulated concerns that went beyond the formal assessments offered by male community leaders. A group of women from RMFs explained their skepticism about CRMs: “There is no marriage ceremony that takes place. We don’t know how these women are sourced for such families, what their family backgrounds are, or whether they even have any family members or not. Because if they had, we would see them at least some time, but we have hardly seen any relative of these women ever coming to their houses after the so-called CRMs. At festivals, no one comes, and we are sure that even at the time of their children’s marriages, no one will come then either. How do we accept such women then?” They made it clear that how absence of visible kinship networks created fundamental questions about legitimacy and social standing of CRMFs. In their villages, typically, everyone knows everyone else’s maternal background because women regularly visit other women’s natal family homes during festivals, marriages, times of need or crisis, and at times of deaths of family members. This continuous exchange of visits creates a system where every woman has a visible family network to fall back on, which legitimizes her position within the community. These women were witnesses to each other’s marriage ceremonies and share everything from language to caste to culture. The absence of these familiar markers of social integration with no visible relatives, no marriage ceremonies, no festival visits created a fundamental challenge, often ignored, to accepting women in CRMFs into existing social networks.

5.2.3 Institutional Constraints on Support

Sarpanches across villages expressed deep frustration with the structural limitations that prevented them from supporting CRMF and their children revealing a critical gap between what they wanted to do for their communities and what they could actually accomplish. It highlighted how Gram Panchayats had become largely ineffective in addressing the complex

social challenges posed by changing marriage patterns. They universally expressed frustration with severe financial constraints that made their institutions incapable of providing any real support for community development initiatives, particularly those that could help marginalized families like those formed through CRMs. Shubhkaran (S3) explained, “The Gram Panchayat receives hardly any funds from the state government. We are elected in the name of local democracy, but nothing significant happens afterward.” This lack of financial availability created a series of problems that affected their ability to support CRMF integration, provide educational opportunities for children from these families, create employment opportunities for skilled women from CRMs, and develop social programs that could improve these families’ standing in the community. Beyond financial constraints, they also described a fundamental lack of administrative freedom that severely limited their capacity to develop locally responsive interventions for supporting CRMFs. They emphasized that all significant decisions had to conform to directives from central and state governments, leaving little room for locally tailored initiatives. The husband of Nirmala (S6), speaking as the “Sarpanch representative,” explained, “The Gram Panchayat is dependent on the government orders. If they want streetlamps, they will have them; if they want any other facility, they will have it. But as elected representatives, they cannot do anything at all on their own. The people of the village have to understand these facts.” This top-down structure meant that Sarpanches could not independently design programs to use the skills that CRMF women brought to their communities, nor they could create targeted interventions.

The constraints on local autonomy created particularly huge frustrations when Sarpanches identified specific opportunities to support CRMFs but found themselves unable to act. Their inability to provide direct employment or create targeted support programs meant that valuable skills represented by women from CRMs remained unused, limiting these families' economic advancement and social integration. Sandeep (S10) described his limitations: “If any CRMF thinks that the Sarpanch can help them with anything, I cannot help them with money for example. What I can do is I can go with them anywhere to represent them or the village; that’s it. I don’t have any other power. I can help them enroll their children in the village’s government school, etc.” Their frustration with institutional limitations was clear through their descriptions of specifically modest interventions they wished to implement but found impossible due to resource and autonomy constraints. The husband of Kamala Devi (S18), again as the “Sarpanch representative” shared his long-standing desire:

> For long I have wanted to build a library in the village's *Panchayat Bhawan*. There is a room that is empty and, with funds, can be converted into a space for both younger and older children where they can come for collective studies. It will have books, internet connection, and other useful resources for them. It seems very basic for a Gram Panchayat to do, but even this I have not been able to do. For everything we need orders from the district or the state level, no independence.

Such initiatives represented attempts to create neutral spaces where children from CRMFs could interact with other local children on equal terms, potentially reducing social barriers and improving their integration into community social networks. The underutilization of human capital represented by women in CRMs was another significant source of frustration for Sarpanches attempting to support these families' advancement as they understood their inherent vulnerabilities. Santosh Devi (S17), a female sarpanch, observed, "I have met with many CRMF women and know that they know many things to make and create in art especially. Won't it be great if we can sell their art and they make profits? But I don't know how this can be possible, only if the government takes such steps." However, their inability to create local jobs or establish any economic programs on their own meant that these valuable skills remained unutilized.

5.2.4 The Role of Narrative Identity in Social Evaluation Processes

Extended conversations with Sarpanches revealed that their evaluations of CRMF children's marriageability are deeply embedded in their own personal stories as community leaders and problem-solvers. Beginning interviews with their personal backgrounds, election journeys, and village visions before discussing CRMs proved crucial, as it illuminated how they constructed their own personal narratives and understood their roles within the community. When they recounted their leadership trajectories, they consistently crafted narratives that positioned them as both guardians of traditional values and pragmatic leaders capable of navigating contemporary challenges. Their personal stories, what McAdams (2011) conceptualized as narrative identities, fundamentally shaped how they perceived and evaluated CRMFs and their children's matrimonial prospects in particular.

However, their narrative identities extended beyond individual self-perceptions; they were profoundly informed by their worldview, relationships with fellow village and community members as elected representatives, and their frequent interactions with them. Unlike ordinary community members, Sarpanches regularly engaged with government

machinery and officials, positioning them as crucial intermediaries between state apparatus and local populations. This unique social positioning meant they did not merely hold individual opinions about CRMFs; they actively shaped the entire village community's worldview about these families and, more broadly, about social norms and practices. Their narrative identities thus carried disproportionate influence in determining community attitudes, making their personal stories particularly significant for understanding broader social dynamics. When discussing CRMs, they integrated these arrangements into their broader narratives about effective community leadership. They framed CRMs as tests of their wisdom and guidance rather than threats to community order. By consistently describing CRMs as *majboori* (structural necessity) rather than moral failures, they constructed stories that transformed potential community problems into opportunities for demonstrating empathetic leadership and adaptive problem-solving capabilities. This narrative positioning allowed them to maintain legitimacy while accommodating demographic realities that challenged traditional matrimonial patterns.

Those who saw themselves primarily as pragmatic problem-solvers focused on structural constraints and expressed genuine sympathy for CRMFs. Conversely, those who viewed themselves as guardians of tradition emphasized the importance of maintaining traditional criteria while still considering CRMF children's welfare as part of their community responsibilities. They demonstrated that their judgments were not merely reactive responses to individual cases or demographic pressures. Rather, their evaluations are actively shaped by the life stories they construct to give meaning and coherence to their leadership experience. The personal narratives they develop, emphasizing tradition preservation, practical adaptation, community service, and moral guidance, directly influence how they evaluate CRMFs and assess their children's marriageability prospects. This narrative-guided evaluation process has material consequences for marriage market positioning, as Sarpanches' assessments carry substantial weight in community decision-making. Also, understanding their narrative identities in this comprehensive manner proved essential for this dissertation as it revealed how individual identity construction intersected with institutional evaluation processes and community norms. This methodological insight suggested that seemingly objective assessments of marriageability were filtered through complex personal stories that reflected leaders' need for identity coherence and meaning making in their roles.

5.3 Administrative Distance: Limited Bureaucratic Engagement with CRMFs

Interviews with government officials at block, district, and state levels revealed a complex landscape of limited administrative engagement with CRMFs that varied significantly based on officers' regional origins and local embeddedness. While locally embedded officers demonstrated intimate knowledge of CRM dynamics and expressed genuine concerns about these families' welfare and their children's matrimonial prospects, non-local officers showed limited awareness or institutional interest in addressing any challenges these families faced. This variation in administrative perspective illuminated how personal geographic and cultural connections also shaped bureaucratic attention to demographic and social issues, creating uneven patterns of institutional awareness that directly impacted their service delivery. The examination of administrative responses revealed two clear critical dimensions of bureaucratic engagement with CRMFs. First, the stark contrast between locally embedded officers who possessed knowledge of specific CRM cases and community dynamics, and non-local officers who exhibited professional detachment or dismissive attitudes toward these families' needs. Second, the institutional constraints prevented even well-intentioned officials from providing meaningful support beyond basic procedural services, highlighting a fundamental policy void surrounding CRMFs that left them largely invisible to formal administrative systems.

Despite their professional positioning, locally embedded officers expressed significant matrimonial anxieties that extended beyond their administrative roles to encompass personal concerns about CRMF children's marriage prospects in an increasingly challenging regional matrimonial market. These shared anxieties revealed how demographic pressures and economic constraints created common concerns that transcended professional boundaries, while simultaneously explaining why government officers maintained institutional distance from the social evaluation processes that characterized community responses to CRMs.

5.3.1 Local Embeddedness and Professional Detachment

Government officers who were native to the Narnaul region or neighboring areas showed comprehensive awareness of the increasing prevalence of CRMs and displayed detailed knowledge of specific cases they knew and general community's reactions to them. PM-D1 explained:

> Everyone knows that there are CRMs in this region. You ask literally anyone, and they will tell you. Whenever I visit villages and talk to women, I get to know more and more of their numbers.

It became clear that their personal familiarity with local economic pressures and community norms provided them with frameworks for understanding CRMs as a significant social phenomenon requiring institutional attention. These locally embedded officers expressed genuine concerns about the welfare and integration challenges women in CRMFs faced with an empathetic understanding of the cultural, linguistic, and social barriers they further faced in their new communities. BPM-B1 shared, "I have come across several women from CRMFs and they have told me that initially they struggled a lot adjusting to their life here, from language barriers, cultural isolation, and limited social support networks to economic dependency, that affected their well-being and their families' social positioning." Particularly notable was these officers' awareness of potential intergenerational implications for children born in CRMFs, including concerns about their future social integration and marriageability within their local communities. SEPO-B1 reflected, "Some of my friends, in good positions but in private jobs, struggled to get married. They married at a late age. So, I can imagine what will happen to children born in these vulnerable CRMFs. They will struggle more than my friends (in RMFs)." They mentioned how children from CRMFs might face unique challenges in navigating local social hierarchies, establishing community social acceptance, and securing advantageous marriages within traditional matchmaking systems.

In stark contrast, government officials who were not native to the region showed limited awareness and had minimal interest in understanding or addressing the associated challenges with CRMFs in Narnaul. These non-local officers typically responded to questions about CRMFs with general statements about marriage registration procedures or legal frameworks, revealing their disconnection from the lived realities and social implications of these matrimonial arrangements. CMGGA-D1 dismissed the topic entirely: "I do not think they are unique. There are always families who are vulnerable and there are ones who hold significance. I didn't think such families even existed. But due to time constraints, I cannot have any more discussions as well." The officer called any discussions on the matter of CRMs a waste of everyone's time. Such responses also suggested that administrative posting systems frequently transferred officials between different regions within the state creating

field-level knowledge gaps, while reducing institutional capacity for addressing locally specific issues. Their limited engagement with CRMs appeared to stem from both lack of personal exposure and absence of institutional frameworks systematically orienting them toward understanding local demographic and social challenges. DC-D1, holding perhaps the most important position at the district level, demonstrated this disconnect: “I didn’t think this region had such families. I only knew that the region has a low sex ratio and many unmarried men, but I didn’t know of such marriages where women from faraway places traveled for marriage.” Their professional focus remained centered on standardized administrative procedures and policy implementation protocols that did not account for the complex social dimensions of CRMs or their implications for community welfare and social cohesion.

More significantly, regardless of their regional origins, the government officials interviewed showed a markedly different approach to CRMFs compared to Sarpanches and other community members, notably avoiding the social evaluation and ranking processes that characterized community responses. Unlike Sarpanches and community members who engaged in systematic assessments of CRMF children’s marriageability and family positioning, government officers maintained professional detachment from such evaluative activities, neither expressing preferences for particular marriage arrangements nor articulating hierarchical assessments of different family types. This professional neutrality reflected their institutional position as service providers rather than community arbiters. Their avoidance of social evaluation activities may also have been due to their personal and familial distance from dealing with local marriage markets that would make such evaluations not relevant to their own families and social networks. Most government officials, particularly those posted from other regions, did not anticipate that CRMs would directly impact on their own families’ matrimonial strategies in any kind. PO-S1 explained, “I have not seen or come across any such family so far. I have no such family in my relation as well, so I do not want to engage in any kind of social assessment or evaluation.” The officer further said that the state government is working on the issue of lack of women in the state through various campaigns and perhaps that is the only way forward. This personal detachment, combined with professional obligations to treat all citizens equitably regardless of marriage type or family origin, created an administrative stance that was markedly different from the sympathetic-but-evaluative approaches characteristic of community members.

The different engagement patterns between locally embedded and non-local officers revealed broader questions about the relationship between administrative effectiveness and local knowledge in addressing complex social phenomena. While professional detachment and standardized procedures ensure equal treatment across different family types, the limited awareness shown by non-local officers suggested potential gaps in institutional capacity for understanding and responding to evolving demographic challenges that require nuanced appreciation of local social dynamics.

5.3.2 Administrative Disengagement and Limitations

Government officials further revealed a striking institutional vacuum surrounding CRMFs, characterized by the absence of specific policies, programs, or administrative frameworks designed to address the unique challenges facing these families and their children. Even among officers who showed awareness about CRMFs and expressed genuine willingness to provide support, their responses consistently highlighted fundamental limitations in their institutional capacity to offer meaningful assistance beyond basic procedural services. This policy-void created a situation where officials recognized significant social challenges but possessed no institutional mechanisms to address them, resulting in administrative responses that were simultaneously sympathetic and structurally powerless. They identified an absence of state and district-level policies as the primary constraint limiting their capacity to provide meaningful assistance. These officers, particularly those with local awareness of CRMF challenges, expressed frustration with institutional systems that provided no specific guidance, resources, or frameworks for addressing the complex integration and welfare needs of families formed through CRMs. BDPO-B1 explained: “There is no state or district policy for such families or their children so far. Thus, I cannot do anything.” A clear fundamental mismatch between administrative willingness to assist and institutional capacity to act existed highlighting how policy gaps can make even well-intentioned officials ineffective in addressing emerging social phenomena that fall outside established program categories. Their descriptions of limited authority showed how bureaucratic roles are restricted by available policy instruments and procedural mandates, creating institutional boundaries that prevent comprehensive responses to complex social challenges. Even officials who recognized the multifaceted needs of CRMFs found themselves limited to providing only basic procedural assistance that addressed immediate documentation needs rather than broader integration or welfare concerns. SEPO-B1 described his constraints: “If CRMFs approach me for

certificates or documents, I can help them with my assistance and make sure they have these documents. Some of them may get some governmental assistance and their documents, such as widow pension or girl child assistance." This limitation reflected broader characteristics of Indian administrative systems, where official authority comes from specific policy mandates and program guidelines, leaving little room for discretionary interventions that might address novel social phenomena not anticipated by existing policy frameworks. The procedural limitations experienced by them extended to specific documentation services that, while important for establishing legal identity and accessing basic services, failed to address the deeper social integration and welfare challenges facing CRMFs. BEO-B1 stated: "I am bound to my duties and that does not mean only working for CRMF or their children."

The contrast between officers' procedural capabilities and the comprehensive needs of CRMFs revealed further fundamental limitations in how administrative systems conceptualize and respond to social challenges. While documentation services provided essential foundations for accessing education, healthcare, and other public services, they failed to address the social integration challenges, cultural adaptation needs, economic vulnerabilities, and community acceptance issues that significantly affected these families' well-being and their children's future prospects, marriages in particular. PM-D1 articulated this gap clearly:

> I think what they need is recognition from their fellow village members, social acceptance that they are humans too and they did not make a mistake by marrying in this region, as well as help if they are facing domestic abuse or facing caste- or color-based slurs or need help with education or future-related issues of their children and so on. Currently, none of it falls under my responsibilities, which creates gaps.

Most strikingly, the Deputy Commissioner, the administrative official with the greatest formal authority and broadest mandate for district welfare, showed institutional disengagement that bordered on dismissive rejection of CRMFs as legitimate concerns for government attention. The DC's response revealed a troubling institutional attitude that normalized these families' challenges while deflecting responsibility for addressing their needs to non-governmental organizations. DC-D1 simply stated: "I think they should approach local or other NGOs to help them with things they need." This response was particularly significant given the DC's position as the senior-most administrative official responsible for coordinating district-level welfare programs and ensuring comprehensive

service delivery to all citizen groups within the jurisdiction. This institutional disengagement shown by senior officials had cascading effects on lower-level administrators who might otherwise have sought creative approaches to supporting CRMFs within existing program frameworks. When district-level leadership signals that particular social phenomena fall outside government responsibility, subordinate officers receive implicit guidance to limit their engagement and avoid developing innovative responses that might exceed their perceived mandate. DDPO-D1 explained, “Even if I am interested in helping these CRMFs, I am bound to take permission from my senior-level officers, which is impossible.”

The absence of CRMF-specific policies and the resulting institutional limitations provided a crucial explanatory framework for understanding why government officers avoided the social evaluation processes that characterized community responses to CRMs. Unlike sarpanches and community members who engaged in systematic assessments of family positioning and children’s marriageability prospects, government officers operated within professional frameworks that defined their responsibilities through available programs and procedures rather than comprehensive welfare evaluations. YP-B1 explained, “We don’t evaluate them socially, as we do not deal with them on a regular basis.” This institutional positioning created professional distance from the intimate social dynamics that drove community-level ranking and evaluation processes. The low institutional interest in CRMFs also revealed broader questions about how administrative systems adapt to demographic transitions and changing social patterns that challenge established policy categories. The absence of specific programs or frameworks for addressing CRMF needs suggested institutional lag in recognizing and responding to demographic adaptations that had become increasingly common across North Indian rural areas experiencing bride shortages. DPO-D1 noted, “Government has its priorities, popular campaigns, or schemes for a larger number of people. CRMFs are not yet part of those schemes.” This institutional inertia rendered significant demographic phenomena largely invisible to formal administrative systems despite their growing prevalence. SCWC-D1 stated, “We have not come across any cases of domestic violence or abuse faced by women in CRMFs yet,” revealing administrative disconnect rather than absence of violence. This institutional ambiguity, shaped by officials’ regional origins and local embeddedness, created inconsistent responses across departments while reinforcing the perception that these families’ needs fell outside normal government responsibility.

Conclusion

The analysis of stakeholder perspectives revealed that social evaluation processes operated through fundamentally distinct approaches that reflected different forms of embeddedness, institutional positioning, and evaluative responsibilities within rural North Indian communities. CRMF parents engaged in "anticipatory social evaluation" that transformed personal experiences of marginalization into strategic frameworks for their children's future positioning, while simultaneously confronting structural constraints that limit their capacity to provide adequate support. Sarpanches demonstrated "sympathetic stratification" that maintained hierarchical boundaries while accommodating demographic necessities, creating benevolent ranking systems rather than outright exclusion. Government officers exhibited "administrative distance" shaped by policy voids and institutional constraints that restrict their engagement to procedural services while maintaining professional neutrality.

The stakeholder analysis also revealed both the resilience and limitations of traditional social systems in responding to demographic transitions. While community mechanisms existed for conditional inclusion of CRMFs, institutional support remained minimal, and family-level strategies faced structural barriers that limited their effectiveness. This created social environments where demographic adaptations are accommodated through informal processes while formal support remains absent, highlighting how social change occurs through negotiated accommodation rather than systematic transformation. The differential responses across stakeholder groups, however, illuminated both possibilities and constraints for social mobility within changing demographic contexts, demonstrating how marginalized families navigated multiple evaluation systems while working to improve outcomes for subsequent generations.

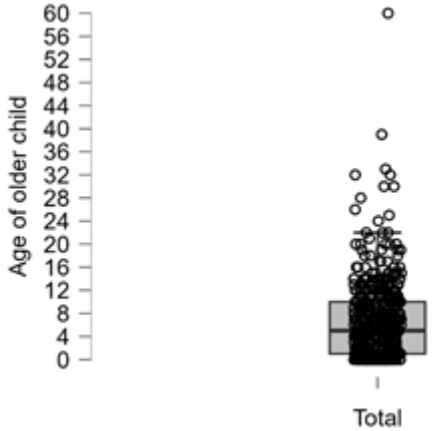
Chapter 6: Emerging Adults at the Crossroads: Narrating Self, Marriageability, and Bounded Agency

How do emerging adults from CRMFs describe their sense of self and marriageability, and in what ways do social interactions and available resources shape their aspirations? This chapter addresses the third research question of the dissertation, focusing on how young people express their identities and marriage positioning while revealing how community responses, familial dynamics, and structural resources influence their future-making processes[3].

Drawing on interviews with seventeen CRMF emerging adults (average age 21.47 years, Figure 28), the analysis utilizes McAdams' (2011) narrative identity framework to examine how individuals develop a coherent sense of self through storytelling that incorporates past experiences, present circumstances, and imagined futures. This method acknowledges that ongoing interaction with community evaluation, family expectations, and resource availability influence identity formation, self-understanding, and aspiration development for CRMF emerging adults.

Figure 28

Distribution of First-Born Child Ages in 497 CRMFs



The chapter is organized into two parts that work together to address the research question comprehensively. Part One presents complete narrative portraits of seventeen

[3] Parts of this chapter appeared in earlier form in Ankit, "Othered: Adult children of cross-region marriages in rural Haryana, India," in *Handbook of Social Justice in the Global South*, ed. N. Deb, M. Nair, and G. W. Muschert (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025), 333-348, https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803921150.00032.

emerging adults that preserve integrity and sequencing through which participants describe themselves and their circumstances while providing an empirical foundation for thematic analysis. Part Two develops a thematic synthesis that illuminates shared patterns in how senses of self and marriageability are described and shaped while maintaining attention to variation and complexity within CRMF experiences.

Part One: The 17 Narrative Portraits

The 17 participant narratives are presented in a consistent structure, beginning with biographical background and moving through formative experiences, turning points, and current circumstances. This uniformity serves analytical purposes: it facilitates comparison across cases, maintains analytic focus on content rather than storytelling variations, and reflects the systematic application of narrative identity as the primary analytical lens. By maintaining consistent narrative architecture, the analysis highlights how each participant constructs sense of self within similar scaffolding, making convergences and divergences in identity work, marriageability perceptions, and everyday social interactions visible for subsequent thematic synthesis.

Including all participant narratives as complete accounts is central to employing narrative identity as the primary analytical framework. McAdams (2011) emphasizes that narrative identity represents the internalized story of self that individuals construct to provide life with unity, purpose, and meaning, integrating past experiences, present circumstances, and anticipated futures into a coherent life story. By presenting complete life histories, the analysis preserves the integrity, sequencing, and voice through which participants construct their identities, maintaining what McAdams describes as the temporal coherence essential to narrative identity formation. The following narratives capture how these seventeen emerging adults understand their place in the world, their sense of self, and their marriageability as they navigate the complexities of being children of CRMFs.

EA1 Gagan: "I Grew Up Inside the House"

Gagan's family belongs to the Khati (carpenter) caste, categorized within the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in Haryana, similar to the dominant Ahirs. However, their economic and social status remained precarious. His father was once a skilled carpenter, but an accident and subsequent health complications forced his retirement. Subsequently, his mother, who originated from a remote village in West Bengal, assumed responsibility for earning income by working as a cook in a nearby government school. From a young age, he

recognized the differential treatment directed toward him and his family. He recalled being subjected to derogatory comments about his skin color and the non-vegetarian food consumed by his family. He was consistently reminded of his mother's Bengali heritage by the village community:

> I was in the second grade. I was returning home from school one day. On the way to our house, there were individuals who would sit at the filter station. "Hey, Bengali!" one of them called me. Come here! Your mother is from Bengal! They pass such mean comments.

Even as a child, he could discern that the manner in which people spoke was intended to be insulting: "No one calls me by my name when we play. They always call me "ae Bengali or Bihari" (someone who belongs to West Bengal or Bihar) or "bahar wali ka" (son of an outsider), and I feel awful about it.

He was subjected to numerous absurd and hurtful stories regarding another's sense of community: "They'd say, 'His mother is from Bengal. People in that location consume insects and engage in black magic. Or 'We don't know what they eat and drink there!'" These remarks became part of his everyday reality. He bore the repercussions of his family's CRM, which garnered adverse attention:

> My parents had an interstate marriage. I have no problem with their marriage. I do not have an issue with being referred to as Bengali; however, I am concerned with the manner in which people speak about it. They talk about us in a way that pricks me from the inside.

This led to him spending the majority of his childhood indoors:

> I have grown up inside the house since childhood. I have never gone out to play. If something happened in a place I had not even passed by, our neighbors would come straight home and say to my parents, "Your son did this." And then I would be beaten up at home by my father. That is why I have never gone out to play since childhood.

His mother also faced humiliation and violence: "They say in the villages, 'She is possessed.' My father's aunt used to beat my mother a lot because of this. She used to say, 'She is Bengali. She has brought demons with her." Over time, his mother stopped going out frequently.

My mother does not go out often because otherwise people talk behind her back. It hurts me more when people do that. They behave the way they do because they hold beliefs like that. Such behavior prevents someone from going out, moving, or playing.

He further recalled a particularly painful incident:

During childhood, I remember one day my mother was cooking rice and fish for our lunch. Suddenly, a group of local villagers gathered at our house and asked what we had prepared. They did not allow us to eat fish and threw the pot away. They asked, “Why do you continue to eat *keede makode* (insects) so frequently? Don’t you realize that our society is vegetarian?”

He considered the community's assumptions about his family's dietary habits and questioned their reasoning: “Was it truly my mother's responsibility?” She used to eat fish regularly back home, and we liked it too.” These comments extended beyond food preferences to broader judgments about his father's marriage choice. Community members would ask, “From Bengal? How did your father marry so far away? Could your father not find a bride here? He brought a bride from so far away.” These remarks heightened his awareness of how CRMs remained unacceptable to many villagers.

Educational experiences presented additional challenges. He described himself as quiet and withdrawn, leading some teachers to assume he was academically weak. However, supportive teachers made a significant difference in their self-perception:

Several teachers treated me very well. For them, the background of my parents did not matter. I was just a student. I excel in my studies, which helped me feel respected, at least while I was in school.

He contrasted his own responses to discrimination with those of his fifteen-year-old brother, who adopted a more confrontational approach:

He is not like me. He didn't let people treat him like that. He answers them back. He gives it back to them in their words. He does not let it get to him like I did. I used to think that whatever happened to me would now happen with my brother as well. But he is not like that. If he fights with someone, no one comes back to say anything to him. So people do not talk to him as much.

Regarding marriage prospects, Gagan expressed pessimism about finding a partner locally: “People here are overly concerned about my mother’s background. They will never forget or forgive that. I do not think anyone from here will marry me. Everyone knows about us.” Despite these challenges, he articulated aspirations for geographic and social mobility:

> I hope I get a good paying job. Something decent. This is to be done to demonstrate to others that even a boy from such circumstances can emerge. People should feel ashamed of the way they treated us. They made me feel ashamed of who I was.

EA2 Ganesh: “Everything Is Good, But Not Everything Feels Easy”

Ganesh, an emerging adult from the dominant Ahir caste community, resides in the same cluster of villages as Gagan; however, his experiences have taken a distinct course. Despite both originating from CRMFs, his life has been influenced by the social dynamics of caste, gender, and acceptance in a manner that differs from his peers. His mother is the second wife of his father and hails from the northeastern state of Tripura. His father had remarried at the age of forty after losing his first wife to an illness, resulting in a substantial eighteen-year age gap between him and his mother. He was born into this second marriage and has two older stepsisters from his father's first marriage.

He recalls a childhood that was both joyful and financially constrained. His father was a farmer with a modest income, but they were able to make ends meet. The bonds he shared at home are what he remembers most fondly:

> My mother raised me from the very beginning. My father was already old when I was born. He did everything he could for us. He got my sisters married into good families before he passed away. They live nearby and often come home to visit. They love me a lot. Even when we didn't have much, our home always felt warm.

He and his parents traveled to Tripura when he was approximately four or five years old. He has a vague recollection of the journey, but he has not returned since. Since his father’s passing a few years ago, his mother has maintained communication with her family through phone calls; however, physical visits have not occurred. The connection that he has formed with the maternal relatives of his stepsisters is the memory that he retains most vividly:

> They treat me like they are on their own. I am the only boy in the family, and in our culture, sons and grandsons are important. They give me a lot of affection and respect.

He successfully completed his education at a private school in the vicinity, achieving commendable grades. He is currently enrolled in computer courses and is also pursuing a commerce degree at a local college. His objective is evident: he is eager to secure employment in the near future to provide for his mother and establish a secure future:

> My mother is the one who has supported my studies. She continued to work as an *Anganwadi* worker (childcare worker) after my father's passing. Although the salary is modest, she has effectively managed all responsibilities. I never had to withdraw from school due to financial constraints. Although she continues to encounter challenges with Haryanvi, she has successfully managed her affairs. People occasionally fail to comprehend her correctly.

Despite the affection and relative acceptance, there are things that still make him uneasy. He mentioned that he often tries to avoid letting his mother speak to his friends when they visit.

> She speaks with an accent and uses different words. People don't understand her. I feel a bit ashamed sometimes. Not because of her, but because others don't know how to respond. They might say something rude, even unintentionally.

His mother tongue is Bengali, but he only understands parts of it and does not speak it fluently. He is protective of her, although he distances her in subtle ways as a result of the linguistic distance and cultural unfamiliarity. Though he has not faced public discrimination like Gagan, his relationship with his mother's background remains quiet and somewhat hidden. There have been some family conversations about his marriage, but they have remained within the family circle. Unlike Gagan, he does not face open ridicules for being part of a cross-regional marriage family. His dominant caste identity and his father’s local roots have shielded him from overt judgment. Yet, that does not mean everything is easy. He doesn't know where or how he'll marry since they haven't talked about it outside.

He maintains an understated tension. On the one hand, he has received educational support, family love, and friends. On the other hand, he is uncertain about the reaction of the

outside world when his mother's background is incorporated into the narrative. He is at ease in his surroundings; however, it does not feel like home, and he feels apprehensive when he is around others. His narrative illustrates how privilege in certain domains, such as caste and social recognition, can induce a sense of comfort; however, cross-regional identity can still introduce subtle pressures to conform or to safeguard one's family from scrutiny. He has not been required to grow up within the confines of the house, as Gagan did; however, there are still instances in which he conceals information from the public. His life serves as an illustration that belonging is not solely contingent upon acceptance by others; it also pertains to the degree of autonomy one experiences in revealing their origins. Even when everything is good, it does not feel easy.

EA3 Babita: "Between Expectations and Affections"

Babita, an emerging adult from the Ahir community, is the second of three siblings. Her elder sister is already married, and her younger brother is still in school. Her parents are employed in agriculture; however, it is predominantly her mother who manages the household, as her father struggles with alcoholism and infrequently provides financial support. This household imbalance has significantly influenced Babita's perspectives on relationships, life, and responsibility. She acknowledges the significant pressure she has endured over the years, as her mother also works in people's homes to meet her financial needs.

During her sister's marriage, the family's tension became apparent:

> My father is the younger of two brothers, and when my sister's marriage was being discussed, my uncle, older than my father, tried to interfere in everything. He wanted the match to be with a family of his choice, someone who would benefit him politically. But my father disagreed. There was a huge argument. My uncle said bad things about our mother and even questioned her background. He said no respectable family would take a girl from such a household. That really hurt us. My mother has been the one working for this family, taking care of all of us. She even paid part of my sister's wedding expenses from her savings. Some people talk down to her because she only speaks Assamese and Hindi and has difficulty with the Haryanvi dialect. I think my uncle took advantage of that. Eventually, my father did not give in and got my sister married into a decent family chosen by him. Her in-laws are good people who did not ask for any dowry and respected her education and background.

Babita's family anticipates that she will be able to marry locally, as she is intelligent and has fair skin, similar to her older sister. However, she continues to hope to postpone her marriage: “I told my parents to let me finish my graduation first. I want to work. If I earn something and stand on my feet, I will feel more confident going into a marriage. My parents are supportive of this, especially my mother.”

Despite the social distance that others frequently establish, she maintains a close relationship with her mother.

> My friends often feel uncomfortable conversing with my mother. They speak in Haryanvi, but my mother replies in Hindi, sometimes in her accent, and they don't know how to respond. They say nothing, just smile and look away. But I am comfortable with her. I know some Assamese, and so does my father. My mother speaks with me sometimes. My sister and brother don't understand it at all. But for me, those are warm moments when I can talk to my mother in her language. Perhaps it's because I spent more time with her while growing up. She has never forced anything on me. She only tells me to work hard and to not become dependent on anyone, not even on marriage.

When asked about her brother, Babita's tone shifted to worry. She reflected on the complex balance she maintains between love for her family, ambition for her future, and concern about her brother's lack of direction:

> My brother is currently attending school, but he rarely studies. He is always on his phone, watching videos or playing games. He does not care about his future. My parents keep scolding him, but he does not change. We are girls, so somehow our parents manage to get us married. But how will he get married if he does not study or earn anything? And more importantly, how will he look after our parents in their old age? These are the thoughts that stay in my mind. But no one talks about them out loud.

Her awareness of these dynamics and her determination to do something meaningful with her life show both quiet strength and deep emotional maturity.

EA4 Kapil: “Only the Haryanvi Half Remains”

Kapil, an emerging adult, belongs to the Ahir caste community and is the only son of his parents. His father is employed as a peon at a government school, while his mother is

responsible for overseeing the household and raising cattle at home. The family's financial situation has slightly improved recently as a result of the father's consistent employment. Additionally, they own a small plot of land that serves as a source of income. Kapil is in the process of completing his undergraduate degree and is currently preparing for competitive exams to secure a stable position in the public sector.

> I wouldn't say I had a difficult childhood. We faced some financial struggles, but in the last few years, my father's income has improved, and my mother has also learned to work with cattle, so things are better now. Initially, I had trouble making friends, but by high school and college, I had no issues. My friends come to my house, and I visit them. I used to go out and play a lot, but not these days, as I am busy preparing for exams.

Kapil presents himself as a confident and determined student. However, beneath this resolve lies a quieter narrative of disconnection and emotional distance within the family. His relationship with his mother is marked by silence and avoidance.

> I wish I had a mother from a local area. There were certain circumstances that neither she nor I were required to endure in silence. I have witnessed many domestic fights between her and my father while growing up. The fights have consistently been rooted in my mother's inability or unwillingness to perform tasks in the same manner as her peers, whether it be tending buffaloes, managing guests, or keeping up with expectations.

Unlike his peers who speak freely of their family lives, Kapil distances his public self from his maternal background. He rarely mentions his mother in conversations with friends: "My friends like me because I am always there for them. My background has not had any impact on that. They count on me as one of their own. But I agree with the fact that I do not bring my mother into any conversations I have with anyone. I stay silent on this topic."

His maternal relatives are almost entirely absent from his life. He recalls visiting his maternal uncle's family once but notes that his mother has since lost contact with them. Their economic condition is poor, and they have not shown much interest in maintaining ties.

> I am simply unaware of my maternal lineage. We do not discuss them, and no one ever visits. My father asserts that it is permissible to move on from the past. I have

> accepted this reality. In all honesty, I derive greater pleasure from visiting my bua's (father's sister) residence. I at least experience a sense of connection in that location.

Kapil asserts that he has acquired all of his knowledge from his father, whom he regards as a role model for achieving government employment despite their obstacles. Yet, he acknowledges that his father has had issues with alcohol and that his mother remains largely isolated at home. He spoke about his possible marriage independently:

> Although my father is strict, he remains optimistic. He asserts that he will facilitate my marriage in some manner. I do not believe I wish to marry someone from outside Haryana again. I am not interested in a cross-regional marriage. I have witnessed the detrimental effects on a family when the woman is not accepted. I may not be able to marry if I do not secure a good job. Too much competition exists.

He is acutely aware of the importance of local identity in terms of social belonging and being "marriageable," and he is adamant about expressing his identity: "I identify as entirely Haryanvi and do not relate to my mother's background, nor am I familiar with the language she speaks. She tried teaching us, but we never picked it up. Even though she is now unable to speak it very well. We speak Haryanvi at home."

EA5 Bhoomi: "From Cross-Regional Roots to Confronting Marital Violence"

Bhoomi is a 22-year-old emerging adult from a Gurjar family who was compelled to discontinue her education and marry at a young age. She married at the age of 20 and has a younger brother who is five years her junior. Her father possesses land in her village, where he engages in agricultural activities for his profession. Her mother originates from Karnataka, located in southern India. Her father was a truck driver who frequently traveled to the southern regions of India. Karnataka was the location of his previous employer. He encountered Bhoomi's mother while employed there, and they were married there. When his wife was pregnant with Bhoomi, he left his job and brought Bhoomi's mother to his village in Haryana after only a few months of marriage.

She reports that her friends and relatives have been unkind to her mother due to the fact that she is of a darker complexion and is from the southern region: "It was my father who went to Karnataka for work and married there. It is not my mother's fault that she had to be in

Haryana after her marriage. She could have easily married there, but she chose to marry my father. She hardly knew the consequences of it."

She informs me that her mother has made significant sacrifices in order to acquire the ability to speak Hindi fluently, thereby enabling her to communicate with others in the village. Despite the desire of her grandparents to visit Karnataka, she has not been there in quite some time. Bhoomi reports that her maternal grandparents and uncle are exceedingly kind and affectionate toward her. However, they are unable to visit them on a regular basis due to the distance. They communicate via the phone.

During the interview with Bhoomi, her mother was also present at her home. She informed me that "people assume she belongs to a lower caste because of her darker skin tone. However, how can I inform them that I belong to a caste that is even higher than theirs? They lack comprehension."

She was compelled to withdraw from her schooling due to her disinterest in academics and her desire to assist her parents in their agricultural endeavors. Soon thereafter, her father located a boy in a nearby village through one of their relatives for her to marry. She consented; however, she later discovered that her husband is an alcoholic and does not earn any money. Her in-laws began to request additional dowry from her and her parents after a few months of marriage, which her parents were unable to provide.

She was unable to save her marriage, despite her best efforts. Her husband would occasionally beat her and exert pressure on her to support his alcoholism. She was unable to endure his treatment of her and informed her father that she desired a divorce from her husband. Fortunately, her father was in favor of her decision, which is not a common occurrence in the area. She submitted an application for divorce in the district court, and the matter remains unresolved. Following her decision to divorce her husband, she relocated to her parents' house. Her in-laws also used to tease her about her mother's "unknown" background. She recounts that her mother-in-law would frequently assert that they were the ones who consented to marry their son with her, as no one would have visited her residence to request her hand. She would say: "Who married a girl whose mother's background is unknown? Who knows what caste or religion she may have belonged to?"

She asserts that she is fortunate to have a resilient mother and is of the opinion that if she were a local, she may not have endorsed her decision to abandon her husband. However, because she originates from a distinct culture in Karnataka, she has different perspectives on family and provides support to her children. Presently, Bhoomi devotes her attention to her brother and endeavors to motivate him to pursue education in order to prevent him from following in her footsteps. Since Bhoomi has not yet borne a child, her father has begun seeking another potential husband for her, as she cannot envision residing with her parents indefinitely. She asserts that:

> A girl is a burden to her parents. Despite the fact that they are required to pay a substantial dowry at the time of her wedding, the in-laws continue to demand additional dowry, which causes stress for the parents. This is why no one wants a daughter. If only both boys and daughters were treated equally, the sex ratio would have been better.

She believes her parents are the best because they supported their kids even when they had little. However, the same relative who recommended that she marry her ex-husband is not accepting any responsibility for the failure of the marriage. This time, her father intends to independently locate a suitable partner for her without any assistance.

In addition, she recalled: “She also had a joyful childhood, where she played with friends.” Her brother is a little reserved and rarely goes out. Since it is unsafe for young girls to leave their homes, she also stopped going out when she was 15 or 16. When she dropped out of her school, she knew that she could only be a housewife but imagined a supportive and nice husband for herself and having at least two kids with him. However, thus far, her plans have not gone as planned. She apologized for embarrassing her parents by requesting a divorce from her husband. Despite having a terrible time at her in-laws, she made an effort to keep it a secret from her parents for more than a year. However, she could take no more.

EA6 Badal: “Navigating Caste Stigma, Nursing, and Marriage Pressures”

Badal is a 24-year-old emerging adult from a Chamar family. His mother is from Maharashtra. He lost his father at a young age. To provide for her children, his mother worked numerous daily jobs. He has a younger brother who has recently enrolled in college and is four years younger than him.

He pursued a nursing program after graduating from a public high school. His academic performance was inadequate to qualify him for enrolment in a medical program, despite his lifelong desire to work in a hospital. Therefore, he enrolled in a nursing course, a diploma program that enables him to work as a nurse in either a hospital or clinic. He desired to secure employment as soon as possible, as his mother was aging and he was responsible for providing for her. He has been employed as a nurse for two years and earns a respectable salary. He also takes responsibility for his brother's college education. He has enrolled his brother in a private coaching center for government jobs in addition to his college education. Badal asserts that:

> We are from a lower caste and lack the resources to continue our education. We are required to secure employment as soon as possible. I would also like my brother to secure a good job, preferably a government position, as private employment is not guaranteed. If he gets a government job, he will get favorable marriage offers.

He did not want to talk about his marriage, as he claimed he was shy. Despite receiving one or two marriage proposals, he found them unappealing for various reasons. But for the last six months, he has not had any proposal from anyone. He is somewhat apprehensive, as he understands that failing to marry promptly will hinder his younger brother's prospects of marriage: "No one wants to arrange a marriage with someone whose elder brother is still not married."

Badal states that he experienced a challenging childhood, as his father succumbed to an illness at an early age. His mother has encountered challenges such as acquiring knowledge of the local dialect and customs, as she is not a native. Additionally, his friends, who were initially from the upper caste, would refer to him as "*chhotu*" (small boy) whenever he went outside to play cricket. This term is used to refer to a small boy or someone who is performing a low-level job: "I did not like this synonym for me and instead preferred to not play with them."

He says his friends called him because they knew he couldn't stop it. Whom could he tell about it? However, his friends from his caste would not use this name for him. Rather, they would refer to him as Badal. Additionally, his brother maintains relationships exclusively with individuals from the Chamar caste. He claims that if he were from a different caste, he would have access to more resources and could apply to become a doctor.

As of now, he is confined to the role of a nurse. He curses himself for being born into a family with no resources and for being a Chamar. He is required to independently locate any proposal for his marriage, as he has few relatives, and they are also unequipped with the necessary resources or capital to assist him. He calls his colleagues or his friends from other villages to inquire about any possible marriage proposals for him. He says that he is only looking for a local marriage proposal because he knows that if he decides to marry someone like his father did, his brother will also have to marry in a similar way, which he does not want. He is confident that he will be able to secure a proposal from a local Chamar family, as he has been self-employed and has the means to provide for his wife:

> At my workplace, a small private clinic, my colleagues sometimes make fun of my mother's unknown background and wonder why my father decided to marry someone from so far away. I am sure that if my maternal uncle or grandparents had been nearby, they would have helped him find a suitable local match for his marriage.

He also recognizes that, despite his status as a nurse, there are few individuals from his village who visit the clinic where he is employed. He asserts that others, for whatever reason, do not recognize his nursing potential. He yearns to be a doctor, particularly a government doctor, so that individuals would seek his care and refrain from seeking treatment elsewhere.

EA7 Bhavika: "Growing Up Under Taunts"

Bhavika is a 19-year-old emerging adult from an Ahir family whose mother hails from Assam. She also has a younger brother. Her father used to earn a living from his tea shop located outside the village, but he can no longer work because he was in an accident that resulted in a fractured leg. Her mother works at an Anganwadi center and is the sole breadwinner.

She recounts bleak anecdotes from her childhood, with a particular emphasis on her younger brother. She informs me that her younger brother's friends constantly make fun of him about the fact that their mother is not Haryanvi (she is from outside), and they consume rice and other food on a regular basis. They also make fun of her brother's height and skin color. She states that she has instructed her brother to confront his friends if they ridicule

him: “We are not responsible for these matters, and what if our parents married in a cross-regional manner?”

She also discloses that she has encountered some of these taunts herself. When she was younger, she recounted that she would engage in outdoor activities. However, she is no longer of playable age, and her mother instructed her to refrain from venturing outdoors in order to avoid being insulted when she reached the age of adolescence.

She informs me that her mother is also aware of these taunts, as individuals have even mocked her. She has been subjected to mistreatment and deception by individuals who believe she is incapable of doing anything. Her mother visited her maternal family in response to the passing of her maternal grandfather while she was still in the womb. Her uncles have also been unkind to them. After his father married in Assam, they ceased communicating with him and attributed the family’s embarrassment to his decision to marry outside the locality:

> When the fight broke out with my uncle, my mother visited my aunt-in-law's house as well. For some family-related reason, my mother used to stay at my aunt-in-law's house while I was growing up. When my father and uncle broke apart here in the village, I came back with my mother to stay with my father. Earlier this house had only two rooms; now we have built upon it. In 2010, when I was still young, my grandfather passed away.

She completed her education up to the 5th standard in a school located in another village, where she formed friendships with both local children and classmates. Among them, she developed a particularly close bond with one best friend. After primary school, she transferred to a different institution. While she was in the 8th standard, an incident occurred in which an intoxicated individual assaulted her father. Since that time, he has been unable to work. The family incurred significant expenses for his medical treatment, and the related legal case remains pending in court.

Sometime later, she visited her maternal uncle's home, a place she greatly admired and described as being far better than her own village. She visited them every two to three years. She recalled that the area was surrounded by bamboo forests, and she enjoyed playing with the local children. She was particularly fond of the natural beauty there, which included

both mountains and rivers. In her view, it is a place that any traveler would consider a paradise, though she felt she could not live there permanently.

Her maternal uncle and aunt had visited her home once or twice. However, she noted that her father's temperament was difficult; he drank heavily, and on one occasion, he quarreled with her maternal uncle. Following that incident, her uncle and aunt decided not to visit again, though they continued to speak with the family daily over the phone. She has recently completed her higher secondary education and has enrolled in a college near Narnaul.

Although she enjoys traveling, she has always preferred staying at home. In the past, she had two or three friends in the village, but at present, she does not have any close friends there. Her younger brother, who is two years her junior, sometimes quarrels with her.

Her father's two sisters are very kind to the family. She visited their homes on several occasions, and on one occasion, she stayed with them for an entire month, during which they took excellent care of her. She says that her mother's story is difficult. According to her, she was "bought with money." She had gone to Bhiwadi in Rajasthan, where someone took her without her consent. That man, now deceased, brought her to be married in the village. She recalls that period as a terrible time in her life and resented many people for treating her as though she were a commodity. Even now, many people speak ill of her mother behind her back, often referring to her brother dismissively as "the son of Mona."

Whenever she feels sad, her school friends make an effort to cheer her up. Her mother also does her best to lift her spirits. For her friends, it does not matter where her mother comes from; she values the clarity and honesty they maintain in their relationship. She aspires to continue her education, develop strong computer skills, and secure a good job so that she will not have to depend on anyone financially. Even after her marriage, she hopes to be able to support her parents and ensure their care and respect.

EA8 Babli: "My Brother Is Our Biggest Hope Now"

Babli is a 22-year-old emerging adult from an Ahir family. She has been married for nearly a year and is the eldest of three siblings. She had returned from her in-laws' residence for a few days when I visited her birthplace. She greeted me in the courtyard, where she was seated

cross-legged on a woven cot, her dupatta neatly enveloping her head. She frequently smiled, although not always with joy, and her voice was steady and reflective.

She began by saying that:

> I am fortunate. My husband's family is supportive. They do not mistreat me or request an excessive amount of money as dowry. But they have explicit expectations. I am advised not to work outside the family. They desire me to become a responsible and virtuous housewife. That is my current obligation, they assert.

She takes quiet pride in her graduation, as it is a feat that few women from her background achieve. She credits her education and physical appearance for the success of her marriage: “People tend to value fair skin and educational degrees. I had both, so my marriage was arranged easily. But not everyone has that.”

She attended the local government school, which was the only affordable option for her family:

> Only poor children go there (government school). All of us knew we had to adjust. But I enjoyed attending school. I found learning to be enjoyable. My teachers encouraged me. I still remember one particular teacher, who assured me, “You will excel in your studies.” That meant a lot.

Despite the economic hardship her family faced, she asserts that her mother made every effort to alleviate the situation:

> Papa is a laborer. And… he drinks a lot. Still does. Most of the money would disappear (due to this habit). Ma cleaned and cooked in the homes of others. She never complained. Somehow, we managed to survive.

Her mother is originally from Assam. Babli says her mother's presence in the village was never entirely accepted: “People still comment on how she talks. They say she is different. She doesn't belong. I grew up hearing these things.”

She does not speak of her childhood with bitterness, despite this: “It was difficult, but it was ours. We didn't have much, but we had each other.” Even after her marriage, she maintained a few close friendships that she established during her time in school:

> Two of my best friends are now also married, both in nearby villages. We still talk on the phone and sometimes meet during weddings or festivals. But their families were not like mine. They didn't have to face what I did. Nevertheless, they have never made me feel inferior. They would rather stand up for me if someone said anything. In school too. We used to sit together and talk about what we would become. Teacher, nurse, or police. We knew some dreams were too big, but we dreamt anyway.

She is assisting the family in the search for a suitable match for her younger sister, who has recently completed her education: “She is smart and fair. I do not anticipate that we will be required to provide a significant amount of dowry. Just like my own. People liked me because I looked good and had a degree. For girls like us, these things matter more.”

But her biggest concern is her younger brother, who is 14:

> He is always on the phone. Since COVID, he has changed so much. He ignores his studies and does not engage in conversation with anyone. We are making an effort to explain the situation: who will be responsible for our parents if he fails to complete his education or find employment?

She speaks about him with both affection and urgency: “Once I and my sister leave (after her marriage), there is only him. He is our biggest hope now. If he does not stay on track, what will happen to us (our family)?”

She links her brother's future directly to his ability to secure marriage:

> Currently, families of girls inquire about various aspects, including employment and financial status. How will we locate a suitable candidate for him if he is unemployed? People are already aware of our family background. That does not provide any assistance.

She nods in agreement when I inquire whether she continues to visit Assam, the location of her maternal relatives. However, she maintains a sense of distance: “We traveled more frequently in the past. Ma’s brother continues to reside there. However, nowadays, it is

not consistent. Changes occur subsequently to marriage. We do not communicate with them as frequently. Everyone is preoccupied with their own affairs."

Nevertheless, she cherishes the memories of those visits: "Assam was different. People. Different lifestyles. But they were kind. They never treated us as outsiders. Unlike here, where some individuals continue to assert that we are not 'proper' village residents despite the passage of time."

Her gaze drifts for a moment as she sits silently, then looks back at me:

> I had low expectations for myself. I was always aware that we had a limited amount. But I am okay. At present, my life is satisfactory. All I desire is for my brother to improve. If he succeeds, it will be as though all of our adversities were worthwhile.

Her story, like many others, does not end with grand declarations or dramatic breaks. Babli's voice, which is both firm and reflective, provides a glimpse into the daily negotiations of a young woman who is influenced by her family's history, her mother's migration, and her own cautious aspirations for those who will follow her.

EA9 Kavya: "Maybe I'm Already Ready"

Kavya recently completed her high school exams and celebrated her eighteenth birthday. She is hoping to pursue a college education. She declares: "I am eager to pursue further education; however, I have yet to determine which institution I will attend. Possibly in the vicinity." Her voice is characterized by cautious excitement, a form of restrained hopefulness that is influenced by both possibilities and constraints.

Her father has consistently maintained employment as a local priest. She elaborates:

> He is summoned to perform pujas, weddings, and other ceremonies. Most days of the year he's working. So, we've been okay. My childhood was happy… My brother and I had so many toys. We never felt short of anything.

In addition to financial support, her father also provided emotional support. He frequently shared memories of his own marriage, including his daughter in light-hearted

jokes, and told her stories. “He once expressed his desire to marry a local woman; however, it transpired that he encountered an individual from Madhya Pradesh,” remembers Kavya.

Then things moved quickly, and he got married there. At that time, he did not give it much consideration. Her father has never expressed regret. He maintains that he is content and that her mother is a good person, and that is sufficient for him: “She provides for my brother and me. She knows how to effectively manage the household.”

However, she has come to understand that her father is not the sole individual to have married outside of Haryana. She does not express it with judgment; rather, she states it as a fact:

> Many men in our area have had to marry women from other states. In the absence of any local girls. There are numerous women from Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Assam, and Bengal in our village and the surrounding area. It is not as uncommon as it once was.

She recalls that her father often reflects on the shifting patterns of marriage in their region: “He says it's becoming common, as men cannot find brides within their villages or communities, so they look elsewhere.” His framing is pragmatic, even optimistic, but she is aware that others interpret it differently. “Some people talk about it,” she says, “as if it's strange or somehow lesser. But my father does not care. He says we are lucky. He even enjoys travelling to another state with us; he says it feels like we have two homes.”

For her family, these journeys are not occasional obligations but part of their social rhythm. They travel to Madhya Pradesh every two or three months, visiting her mama, her mother's brother, whose relationship with her father is unusually close. “They’re about the same age,” she explains, “and they talk like old friends.” She smiles at the memory of their effortless companionship: two men seated together, laughter punctuating the conversation.

Now that school is over, her life is becoming more confined to her home: “I liked school. I made many friends. We used to have fun. But even then, I did not go out much. Being a girl can be challenging. After school, I usually stayed home.”

With more unstructured time, her role in household work has expanded: “I have learned cooking,” she says. “I can make tea, some vegetables… My mother says these are things I should know.”

Conversations within the household now revolve, with growing frequency, around her marriage: “This is the subject of the majority of our current discussions. There are times when I feel as though I am already prepared, as the entire house is centered around that.” Her father, in particular, is eager: “He is already discussing the possibility of locating a boy. He is ecstatic. He says that we should commence our search as soon as possible.”

When asked how she feels about this, she hesitates: “I don't know. Maybe it's okay. Maybe not. I am not sure.” After a pause, she adds: “A lot depends on the house I get married into, what kind of people they are, and whether they let me study more. That will decide everything.” She does not talk much about dreams or career: “I haven’t really thought about it. Sometimes I want to do something. But then I think, what if I don't get the chance?” She casts a glance at her younger brother playing with something nearby: “He will have more freedom, I think. There is not much pressure on boys to marry early. He can think about studies, job, everything… I do not have that kind of time.”

She says all this plainly, not as a complaint, but as something she has understood earlier. Her voice remains calm, even when uncertain: “I guess I will see what happens. Right now, everyone is looking ahead for me. So maybe I am already ready (for getting married).”

EA10 Devansh: “I Smile a Lot, But It Is Not Always Simple”

Devansh is merely days away from reaching the age of nineteen. He has finished his high school exams and is currently in a state of restlessness. Although school is over, the next step is not yet fully apparent. “I have not yet selected a college,” he declares. Further:

> I do not know much. My parents are not that educated, so they cannot guide me properly. I talk to my friends on the phone and ask what they are doing. Perhaps I will accompany them wherever they go.

He belongs to the Jat caste, a dominant and historically powerful group in Haryana. However, his caste position has not ensured that he leads an easy life. His father works both as a daily wage laborer and manages a small piece of agricultural land. “It is inadequate,” Devansh states bluntly:

> There are five of us living in the house, and my father's two younger brothers also live with us. One of them has a disability and never got married. The other… I don't know why, but he is also unmarried. So the whole load is on my parents.

His mother is from Assam. Her story is different from the others in the village. “My father had to pay money to the middleman,” he says, glancing down. “He brought her from Assam. He got married because someone had to take care of the house, of my grandmother, and of the two uncles. My grandfather had died just after their wedding, and my grandmother became bedridden. So, everything came to my mother.”

He does not say this with bitterness, just with quiet awareness:

> She has done a lot. Everything, actually. She takes on various responsibilities such as cooking, bathing my grandmother, and managing my three siblings, yet never complains.

He describes himself as someone who has always been cheerful: “I smile a lot,” he says with a grin, “but not because I am always happy. It just comes naturally to me. People say that I always look like I am in a positive mood. I have taken care of my younger brother and sister since we were small. We used to fight a lot too. It was normal.”

He is acutely aware that his parents make a significant effort to ensure that he attends a private school:

> They are doing everything to ensure that we succeed, which is why we are enrolled in a private school. The classes are in English. I am not fluent, but I think it will help me (in the future). That's what my father keeps saying too.

However, he has a limited social life beyond his academic responsibilities. He clarifies: “I do not have many friends in the area. There aren’t many boys my age around here. All my friends are from school. That's it.” Instead, most of his social life now takes place on the phone, where he talks to friends about college plans, discusses which entrance forms to fill out, and considers which colleges are worth applying to.

He says he feels a lot of responsibility, but he struggles to put it into words. He says: “I know I have to do something. Something big, maybe. However, I am not yet sure what it

is. I am just thinking. Sometimes I feel stuck between too many things." There's a small pause, and then he continues: "My father does not pressure me, but I know he expects me to do something good."

When asked about marriage, he laughs a little and says: "Oh, that's very far away. I don't think about it now." But the question clearly lingers in his mind. He is aware that things are more complicated than that:

> Neither of my two uncles is married. One was disabled, and the other... It simply did not happen, in my opinion. I know how difficult it is. Everyone wants to marry locally, but there are very few girls here. People keep saying that even boys from dominant castes are now struggling to find girls.

He has overheard enough discussions to realize that this is turning into a significant problem throughout Haryana:

> Even educated families are bringing brides from faraway places now. I have no idea what the future will hold for me. I seldom contemplate it. Right now, I am primarily concerned with the future with college and, potentially, a job. First and foremost, I wish to determine my future course.

He is conscious of another dimension of his identity, his Assamese heritage through his mother: "I can speak a little Assamese. Just a little. If I had learnt it properly, perhaps I could have used it somewhere. But no one speaks Assamese at home, except my mother. My father does not understand it, and my younger brother and sister do not speak it either. So it is just… there." His voice trails off for a moment before he adds: "I wish we had learnt more."

He recalls his only visit to Assam with vivid detail:

> I have been there just once, but I remember it clearly. The scenery was very beautiful and lushly green. I liked the people too. My (maternal) uncles there are kind. I speak to them occasionally on the phone, but they are always busy. They do not earn much, so they are constantly working. I do not want to disturb them too often. Still, it feels good when we talk.

He does not yet know where he is headed, but he carries each day the quiet weight of decisions still to come. In the softness of his speech, the brief half-smiles, and the way his eyes turn toward his younger siblings as he talks, his sense of responsibility is evident, not as a burden, but as a role he is steadily learning to inhabit. Sometimes, as they sit together on the veranda in the late afternoon light, he listens more than he speaks, letting their chatter fill the pauses. He feels happy.

EA11 Karambir: "Marriage? That's Something Only Ma Thinks About"

Karambir is a 25-year-old resident of a village in the vicinity of Narnaul. He is the eldest son of a Jharkhand woman who married a Haryanvi truck driver several decades prior. He was raised in a family with two sisters, one younger brother, and parents who exhibited minimal interest in education. Upon our meeting, he was assisting his father in repairing a tractor implement in their courtyard, his hands soiled yet his demeanor composed. "I did not study much," Karambir said, leaning back against a low wall:

> We went to school in the village, but I never had much interest. There was no environment for studying at home. Ma would say, do whatever you want as long as you do not bring shame. Papa was often absent, and when he was present, he never really inquired about our grades.

He explained that while his father was often away on long truck trips, there was never any pressure at home to excel academically. He recalls his childhood as easy-going. He had friends throughout the village and spent most of his time outdoors, primarily in the fields, on the streets, and during festivals, working DJ equipment or helping neighbors set up tents. "We always had something to do. It's harvest season, you're a DJ and you're driving someone else's jeep."

Although he completed school, he chose not to pursue college: "I knew it was not for me. And no one pushed me." Unlike many other CRMFs, he maintains that they never faced any kind of discrimination because of their mother's origin:

> She is from Jharkhand, but people in the village like her. She speaks well now. Fair-skinned. Nobody teased us. We are Ahirs. We have land. People knew our family. That was enough.

The family visited Jharkhand a few times during his childhood, but he does not feel a strong connection to that side of the family: “Ma talks to them on the phone sometimes, but we don't visit them very often. It's too far, too expensive, and honestly, we do not feel the need.”

Currently, he works intermittently; sometimes he takes driving jobs for wedding parties, and other times he assists with farming on his family's land. There is no fixed income: “Whatever work is available, we do it. But it is not like we are starving. We manage.”

When the conversation turns to marriage, he pauses before responding. His mother, he explains, continues to search for matches for both him and his sibling, reminding them that she is growing older. Yet proposals do not materialize:

> No one wants to give away their daughter. Some say we do not have a government job. Others just find some excuse. Even though we have land and a house, people still hesitate.

In the local marriage market, the absence of secure, salaried employment, particularly a government post, can outweigh the value of agricultural land or a permanent home, signaling a perceived lack of long-term stability. He does not appear desperate, but the uncertainty is evident: “Earlier I didn't think about marriage at all. Now when Ma worries, I worry a little too. Not a lot, but a little.”

His reflections on the future are modest:

> It’s not like we want to become something big. No one asked us about our future when we were young. No one told us we could become anything. So, we just never thought much.

His sense of possibility has been shaped by the absence of early encouragement, which is common in many rural households where livelihood pathways are narrowly defined. Still, he expresses no bitterness: “I do not regret anything. Life is fine. But yes, Ma keeps saying you should get married.”

His father, once a truck driver, has been bedridden since an accident. With no paternal uncles to rely on, the family draws support from his three paternal aunts. “Aunts are helping. They have connections. But nothing is happening (for marriage).” Their assistance, while socially valuable, has yet to translate into a marriage alliance. He ends with a half-smile, signaling both resignation and acceptance: “Maybe one day something will work out. But for now, whatever is going on is fine.”

EA12 Dharma: “Everything is Fine Except I Cannot Find a Bride”

Dharma is almost 24, the younger brother of Karambir, and lives in the same household. Another afternoon, I conversed with him separately after he had just returned from assisting in the loading of a tractor trolley at a neighbor's farm. Although he is similarly rooted in a simple, rural rhythm of life, he is slightly more reflective than his elder brother. “I studied only until school,” he said casually, seated under the shade of a neem tree:

> After that, I simply did not feel like it. We had neither a supportive environment at home nor any expectations. Papa used to be away, and Ma had so many things to manage. No one ever said, ‘Son, what have you thought about your future?’

He remembers his school years mostly for the friendships he formed, some of which have lasted to this day. “We would roam around a lot. After school, we would go anywhere from the fields and the lanes to DJ functions.” There was never, he says, any strong push to study further, something different, or to aspire to: “People say one should have aspiration, but if no one ever talks about it, where does it come from?” Despite their mother's origins in Jharkhand, Dharma shares Karambir's belief that their treatment in the village was always fair:

> We are Ahirs. We have land. Our mother. People don't say anything. But yes, she is fair-skinned. I do think that if someone didn't have land or reputation, and their mother was from far away, people might treat them differently.

He believes this underlying bias may also shape how others perceive their suitability for marriage:

> Even though we are well known in the village, and even though people come to us for work, or to hire tractors or DJ setups, no one has ever directly approached us with a

> marriage proposal. I believe this is due to the fact that, in people's minds, there remains a distinction when a mother comes from a different region, even if it is never explicitly stated. No one wants to give away their daughter. I think people still wonder if these boys are really suitable (for marriage) or not.

He says his mother is more worried than either he or his brother: “She keeps trying to connect with people she knows. Even our aunts are asking around. But no girl is being found.” He reflects briefly on the gender imbalance in the region:

> There is a shortage of women; we all know that. But everyone still wants sons. It's like they think daughters will be found somewhere or the other. It's not true anymore.

He occasionally drives a relative’s van for local transport or takes up temporary agricultural work. He does not foresee a stable job in the future, yet he does not sound disappointed: “We're not jobless. There's always something to do. We manage.”

He also speaks with warmth about his mother, whom he credits for holding the family together: “She is the one who looks after everyone. Papa is mostly bedridden. She takes care of him too. She just wants us to settle down.”

In his account, her role extends beyond caregiving to quiet social brokerage and reaching out through kin and acquaintances in the hope of finding suitable matches for her sons. When asked about aspirations, he reflects on how they have shifted over time: “We didn't have any then. But now, I just hope we get married soon. Life will change then. Maybe not in a big way, but enough.”

His words suggest a pragmatic vision of the future, where marriage is less about romantic transformation and more about achieving a socially recognized stage of adulthood. He ends the conversation with a line that blends humor with a trace of resignation: “Everything is fine, except no girl is being found.”

EA13 Rakesh: “I’m Doing Okay, But I Do Not Know What Comes Next”

Rakesh is in Class 12, yet he acts like he's older than he is. He answers softly and thoughtfully, being careful not to say too much while still remaining engaged. He says, “School is going well,” as he fixes the cuff of his shirt. “Science is fun, but there are times

when I feel like I need more help." I still attempt to get by. He knows what it means that his school is private. "My parents picked this school because they wanted us to learn English. People claim it will assist us in the future."

He lives in a small house with his parents and other extended family members. His mother is from Jharkhand. Rakesh knows how this changes his daily life. "People know that my mother is from another state. Sometimes they say things or ask questions, but it's not a big deal anymore," he says with a light shrug. He does not say much more, but it is clear that he must accept that others are paying attention to him. He says that his father's marriage was different from most marriages in the neighborhood:

> There was not a big ceremony. They tied the knot in a temple on the main road there (in Jharkhand). Someone who knows both sides set it all up. At the time, my dad worked there. They just did it.

He did not have many friends in his neighborhood when he was a kid:

> There aren't many boys my age around here. Most of them are either employed or have moved away. I don't actually talk to anyone here. Most of my friends are from the school and from other villages. We communicate on the phone during semester breaks or sometimes after school. I guess that is plenty for me.

It was apparent that he was alone in a quiet manner, despite the fact that he did not speak. He stopped when he was asked whether he felt different. After a while, he says, "Not really. But not all the time. Only a little bit."

Rakesh has only gone to Jharkhand once, but he remembers it well: "It is greener there. There are a lot of trees, and the air is better. It is not polluted there. The houses are not the same. People are also more polite. I liked it there."

Since her brother relocated to Haryana for employment, his mother has continued to travel, occasionally returning to Jharkhand and occasionally visiting various towns in the state. His mother remains closely connected to her maternal family. Calls and visits are frequent, and their conversations carry an effortless warmth. They make it a point to tell her that if anything is troubling her, she should let them know immediately. He says this steady assurance feels good to him, like a quiet safety net in the background of their lives.

His voice becomes more cautious when he is asked about his plans after school:

> I don't know yet. I might take science. Maybe there's another option. Nobody at home really knows what to do for college. That's why I talk to my school friends. They advise me what forms to fill out and what will be beneficial for me.

He appears to be quietly determined, despite his hesitation. He anyway wants to move forward. He has a certain nobility about him that keeps him from feeling sorry for himself. “My parents are doing their best. That's why I go to a private school. That's why they want me to study and learn English well.” He trusts them, even if he cannot picture what that life will be like yet.

He looked uncomfortable when the question of marriage came up. He smiled and then looked down. He promptly added, “That's far away.” But then he says:

> Still... I understand how difficult it can be for some men here. This is especially true for individuals who do not own any land or have a strong career. There aren't enough girls. Everyone wants to get married in Haryana, but they can't.

He knows what his family has been through:

> One of my uncles couldn't get married. He had some health problems, but nonetheless... it makes you think. I don't know what's going to happen to me. If I can find someone nearby or not. But I don't want to think about it too much right now. He talked slowly and picked his words carefully. “I just want to focus on my further studies. That's more crucial right now.

He does not make a big deal out of responsibility when he talks about it. “I help my mom from time to time. She puts in a lot of effort. She takes care of my sick grandmother and also handles all other responsibilities. I do my best to help.” He says this not because he is proud, but because it is not true. It is like someone who knows that being a devoted son involves stepping in without being asked. He knows that the future is unclear, but he is willing to go through it regardless.

EA14 Kaali: "For Now, It's School and Home"

Kaali, a reserved emerging adult, maintains a deliberately constrained lifestyle centered around school and domestic responsibilities. Her daily routine follows a strict pattern: "I go to school, come back, and stay at home. I have a few friends, but only from school. I don't go out with them. We talk during school hours. That's all." Unlike peers who might socialize outside formal settings, Kaali's life remains bounded by familial expectations. At home, her focus centers on acquiring domestic skills: "I have learned how to make tea. I can cook some food too. I help with what I can. It's normal. As I grow older, I'm expected to take on more of these tasks."

Her mother's origins in another state represent background knowledge that rarely surfaces in daily conversation. When prompted, Kaali provides minimal information: "People talk differently there. The place is fine. It's okay." This reticence suggests either genuine lack of connection to maternal heritage or deliberate avoidance of the topic. At home, language and customs follow Haryanvi patterns exclusively.

Future planning remains notably absent from Kaali's narrative. Post-school possibilities appear unconsidered or undiscussed: "I'm not sure right now. There's no mention of college, courses, or employment opportunities." This uncertainty may reflect limited exposure to alternatives or family expectations that don't prioritize her individual aspirations. Marriage planning, by contrast, receives implicit attention despite her age. When addressed directly, Kaali responds with resigned acceptance: "They (my parents) will decide. I don't think about it." This response indicates that marriage represents something that will happen to her rather than a choice she will make.

The unspoken pressure surrounding marriage partner selection affects her family's planning. Local marriage remains preferable, but being from a CRMF potentially complicates arrangements. These background differences could influence her future opportunities, even though her daily life appears normal to her. Kaali's narrative reflects careful adherence to expected behavioral patterns. She attends school, follows household rhythms, and avoids questioning future arrangements. Her approach suggests neither defiance nor dreams, but rather quiet acceptance of predetermined pathways that require moving slowly and asking few questions.

EA15 Rohtash: "It's Never Been Peaceful"

Rohtash, nineteen years old, carries experiences that extend far beyond his chronological age. His voice, clear but hesitant, reflects years of witnessing domestic violence: "There's always something going on in our house. Sometimes it's shouting. Sometimes worse."

Childhood memories center on his father's systematic abuse of his mother: "He fights with her over anything. Even for no reason. Sometimes in the middle of the night. Sometimes in front of us. Even when my mother was pregnant, he would hit her. He doesn't care." Violence has become so routine that Rohtash recounts these incidents with blunt matter-of-factness:

> I have seen him throw things. I have seen him pull her by the hair. Once he hit her so much she couldn't even get up. I was small then. I just cried.

His mother's background adds complexity to an already difficult situation. Originally from Bihar, she married into the family at sixteen through arrangements made by a local marriage broker. Rohtash understands fragments of her story: "They say the marriage was arranged by someone who lied about the situation. My mother thought she was coming to a normal household. But it wasn't like that. She is Muslim, and the marriage was a nikah (Muslim wedding)."

Adaptation to Haryana has required his mother to abandon previous identities while enduring continued criticism: "She couldn't speak Haryanvi initially. People would laugh at her. Now she does everything as she speaks the language, does all housework, and still gets blamed." Their home remains a tense space filled with conflict, leading Rohtash to avoid bringing friends over: "My friends at school don't know anything. I don't want them to come here. What if something happens? What if they see fights themselves?"

Educational experiences suffer due to home circumstances: "Sometimes I can't focus. Sometimes I don't even want to go to school." Despite these challenges, his grandmother's insistence ensures his continued attendance. Academic aspirations persist despite environmental obstacles: "I want to do something. I don't know what yet. But not like this. Not this life."

Family economics remain unstable due to his father's unreliability: “He works sometimes. Sometimes he drives a tempo, sometimes he just disappears. When he drinks, it gets worse. He stops giving money. Then we don't have enough food.” Previous attempts at addiction treatment have proven unsuccessful: “He got injections and felt better for some months. But then he started again. It's like nothing really changes.” Financial stress creates additional household tensions: “Sometimes my mother takes small loans. But people often come asking for money, and she has to handle that too. My father takes money and doesn't return it. Then people shout at us, not him.”

Marriage prospects appear distant and complicated by caste and economic factors: “Right now, I'm not thinking about marriage. I don't know if I'll get married or not. Some people say boys from our caste, Dom, aren't getting married easily these days. Especially when the family has financial problems or other issues.” His observations about discrimination against women from outside reflect broader community attitudes: “They always say something. Like 'She's not from here, what would she know?' or 'They send girls here to get rid of them.' I don't like it. But I can't say anything. I'm just a kid.”

Future planning oscillates between escape fantasies and practical constraints: “Sometimes I think I should run away. Or just study really hard and leave. But where will I go? Who will help me?” His primary aspiration centers on achieving household peace: “Not big things. Just peace. Just that people talk to each other nicely. I want my mother to sleep peacefully. That's all.”

EA16 Keshav: “I Didn’t Want to Hide All My Life”

Keshav, twenty-three, chose to meet away from his village, speaking with measured caution about decisions that led to his departure. His composed demeanor occasionally reveals careful word selection when discussing choices considered unconventional in his community: “I didn't run away because I was scared. I ran away because I didn't want to keep hiding who I was and who I loved.”

His childhood unfolded in a modest two-room house on the village periphery, marked by his father's alcoholism and its consequences: “There was always tension in the house. As a child, I didn't fully understand, but I could feel it. Later, I learned that Papa used to beat Ma. Sometimes for no reason, just because he was drunk.” Despite household violence, Keshav's

relationship with his mother remained close: “She's everything. She never lets us sleep hungry. She protected us. Even when Papa hit her, she never raised her voice. But the next morning, she would still pack my tiffin, oil my hair, and ask about my homework.”

His mother's circumstances reflect broader patterns of CRMF vulnerability. Originally from Jharkhand, she was married under exploitative conditions: “My nana (maternal grandfather) was a drunk too. He took money and arranged for my mother to marry my father. That's what she told me once. She was never happy here. No one truly accepted her—not Papa's relatives, not the neighbors.” Contact with maternal relatives remains entirely severed: “Never. We don't even talk to them. I’ve never seen their photos. I used to ask Ma when I was younger, 'What about your brothers, Ma?’ She would say, 'We don't talk about them.' I think she has erased that life.”

His younger sister's recent local marriage represents family attempts at social integration: “We're close. She listens to me. She used to cry during home fights but never talked back. She was quiet. Now she's married nearby. She couldn't come for this interview as requested, but she knows I'm speaking with you.” The catalyst for Keshav's departure involved cross-caste romantic attachment: “I loved someone. She was from my school, from Dhanak caste And I'm Ahir. That was the only thing people saw. That was enough to make it wrong.” His father's reaction combined existing anger with social pressure, while extended family and neighbors echoed rejection.

His mother's response proved unexpectedly supportive: “She just asked, ‘Are you serious?’ I said yes. She said, 'Then go. Do what you have to do.' She didn't bless me, but she didn't stop me either.” Currently residing in Jaipur with a relative, Keshav attempts to establish stability: “I haven't found permanent work yet. I help in local shops. We're managing for now. But I want stability. I want to bring Ma here. Or we could return if people accept us.” However, community memory proves persistent: “I know how villages are. They don't forget easily. People still talk. They say, 'He ran away with a low-caste girl. Shame on the family.' No one cares about love or respect. They care about rules.”

His motivations center on dignity rather than rebellion: “I just didn't want to live like Papa. He was bitter, angry, and drunk. And I didn't want to hide the girl I loved like she made some mistake.” Current aspirations remain modest: “A job. A small house. My Ma with me. That's all. I don't need a big life. I just want one where I don't have to lie.” His departure

memory carries his mother's guidance: “Ma packed some clothes for me. She said, ‘Don't forget who you are. And don't become like your father.’ I carry that with me every day.”

EA17 Ramu: “Online, I Can Be Anyone”

Ramu, twenty-two years old and recently graduated from local college, finds himself navigating uncertainty about his future direction. From an Ahir family in a village outside Narnaul, he speaks thoughtfully about life transitions and identity management. His mother’s origins in West Bengal reflect common CRMF patterns: “Papa couldn't find a match here. A villager knew someone in Bengal. That's how he found Ma.” His family maintains modest agricultural holdings that provide basic security without wealth. His father continues farming their land while the household includes livestock and a two-room brick house. Ramu expresses particular affection for his fifteen-year-old sister: “She's the studious one. Everyone says she'll do better than me. I hope she does.”

Educational experiences proceeded without strong motivation or direction: “I didn't know why I was studying. Nobody told me the point. But I didn't drop out completely. I just kept going.” Recent graduation from a nearby college leaves him uncertain: “I have finished my degree, but I'm not sure what's next. It feels like I'm standing at a crossroads.” Employment remains irregular, combining agricultural assistance with occasional neighbor work. However, he rejects farming as a long-term solution: “Farming is fine, but I want something more stable. Maybe a government job. Or something in a company. But for that, I need to apply and take tests. I don't even have a laptop yet. That's the first thing I want to buy.”

Digital engagement provides alternative identity spaces: “Facebook, Instagram, everything. I have over 300 friends on Facebook. Some from school, some I've never met. On social media, no one knows where I'm from. No caste, no village. I can be anyone there.” This online freedom contrasts sharply with village realities: “But in real life, it's not like that. Here, people ask questions: ‘Who are you? What's your caste? Where's your mother from?’ All those things matter.”

His mother’s background occasionally surfaces in social interactions: “Ma is from Bengal. People say things sometimes, not always directly, but they do. They talk about her language, how she looks, how she talks.” However, his responses have evolved since

childhood: “Once, during a school fight, someone said something to me. I replied, ‘Have you even been to Bengal? I have. My Ma's people live there.’ I felt proud for a moment!”

Visits to Bengal provided positive experiences: “It's very different. The food, the houses, how people speak. I liked it. But we don't go often. It's too far. Too expensive. And my father never went. Only Ma and us kids went.” Among friends, he has learned strategic disclosure: “In childhood, you play with everyone. You fight with each other. But when it's over, you’re friends again. So even if someone said something about Ma, I didn't take it too seriously. Still, I never had too many close friends. I chose who to trust.” Post-graduation social circles have contracted: “Most school friends either went to work or studied further. One or two have married already. I didn't. I stayed. So now it's just two or three friends I really talk to. But I talk a lot online. That's a different world.”

Aspirations reflect tension between security and advancement: “I want a job, regular income. A stable family. Like everyone else. But sometimes I wonder if I can move to a big city. Can I make something of myself that people didn't expect?” Self-doubt quickly emerges: “Then I think, who am I? I studied in government school. I've never lived outside the village. Am I confident enough? Sometimes I feel maybe I should just settle here, take care of the land, look after parents, and get married.” Marriage discussions with his mother emphasize practical timelines, though he remains uncertain about his readiness. His immediate priorities center on technological access: “I want a laptop so I can do things properly. Apply for jobs or maybe take a course. Even learning something online helps. *YouTube pe sab kuch milta hai* (everything is available on YouTube).”

His closing reflection captures current liminal status: “A laptop. And maybe some clarity about what I want to be. Right now, I feel like I’m floating between who I am here and who I could be somewhere else.”

Part Two: Thematic Synthesis

The 17 emerging adults whose narratives inform this analysis represent diverse positioning within CRMF contexts, varying across caste, economic status, educational attainment, and maternal origins (see Table 20).

Table 20

Profile of Emerging Adult Participants (EAs= 17)

S. No.	Emerging Adult	Caste	Age	Education/ Employment Status	Mother's Origin State	Family's Primary Breadwinner	Marriage Status
EA1	Gagan	Khati	18	Student	West Bengal	Mother	Unmarried
EA2	Ganesh	Ahir	19	Student	Tripura	Mother	Unmarried
EA3	Babita	Ahir	19	Student	Assam	Mother	Unmarried
EA4	Kapil	Ahir	22	Student	Assam	Father	Unmarried
EA5	Bhoomi	Gurjar	22	-	Karnataka	Both Parents	Married
EA6	Badal	Chamar	24	Nurse	Maharashtra	Himself	Unmarried
EA7	Bhavika	Ahir	19	Student	Assam	Mother	Unmarried
EA8	Babli	Ahir	22	Housewife	Assam	Mother	Married
EA9	Kavya	Brahmin	18	Student	Madhya Pradesh	Father	Unmarried
EA10	Devansh	Jat	18	Student	Assam	Father	Unmarried

EA11	Karambir	Ahir	25	Informally Employed	Jharkhand	Himself	Unmarried
EA12	Dharma	Ahir	23	Informally Employed	Jharkhand	Himself	Unmarried
EA13	Rakesh	Ahir	18	Student	Jharkhand	Father	Unmarried
EA14	Kaali	Ahir	18	Student	Bihar	Father	Un married
EA15	Rohtash	Dom	19	Student	Bihar	Mother	Unmarried
EA16	Keshav	Ahir	23	Informally Employed	Jharkhand	Himself	Married
EA17	Ramu	Ahir	22	Student	West Bengal	Father	Unmarried

The following four themes capture how these young people navigate their complex positioning:

6.2.1 Othered

Emerging adults from the CRMFs consistently narrated experiences of being positioned as "insiders yet outsiders" within their communities, a liminal status in rural North Indian context (Lamont, 1992). They revealed how various community members employed systematic practices to reinforce distinctions between "authentic" local belonging and the perceived "illegitimacy" of their mothers' cross-regional or unknown origins, foreign cultural practices, and distinct physical characteristics becoming focal points for community policing and extending to encompass the next generation. Brons (2015) referred to "the simultaneous construction of the self or in-group and the other or out-group in mutual and unequal

opposition through identification of some desirable characteristic that the self/in-group has and the other/out-group lacks and/or some undesirable characteristic that the other/out-group has and the self/in-group lacks" as othering (p. 70). This process "sets up a superior self/in-group in contrast to an inferior other/out-group" while maintaining the implicit nature of this hierarchical positioning (Brons, 2015, p. 70). Rather than outright exclusion, community responses involved nuanced positioning that acknowledged physical presence while denying full social membership, a form of conditional inclusion that preserved hierarchical distinctions while accommodating practical realities. This process transformed individual family circumstances into collective markers of difference, creating systematic disadvantages that affected emerging adults' social positioning, peer relationships, and future opportunities within local communities.

6.2.1.1 Labeling and Spatial Exclusion. The othering of CRMF emerging adults operated through interconnected mechanisms that combined verbal labeling with spatial and social exclusion practices. These mechanisms operated as regular social practices that made their otherness part of daily life while reinforcing community hierarchies and belonging criteria. The practices repeatedly highlighted their mothers' origins, cultural differences, and family status as reasons for exclusion while strengthening ideas about what is counted as truly local identity. Verbal labeling was the most obvious way that community borders were made clear and kept up in peer networks. Gagan's (EA1) experience showed how labeling worked by constantly denying people their own identity in favor of putting them in groups based on where their mother came from. He remembered that while they played, his friends never called him by his name and instead referred to him as "ae Bengali, Bihari, or bahar aali ko (son of an outsider)." This naming practice exemplified what Brons (2015) described as the essential mechanism of othering as the systematic obliteration of individual identity in favor of marginalized group affiliation, which also enabled the formation of "a superior self/in-group in contrast to an inferior other/out-group" (p. 70). Simplifying complex personalities into basic categories made it possible to treat people differently while also making the community feel culturally superior. The imaginative stories linked to these labels unveiled intricate systems by which communities established cultural hierarchies while rationalizing exclusionary practices. As Gagan (EA1) recounted: "They would say, 'His mother is from Bengal.' In that place, individuals consume insects and practice black magic. Or "We have no idea what they consume and drink over there!"" These narratives served to maintain mythological boundaries, establishing a significant cultural divide between

"normal" local practices and the supposedly deviant behaviors of outsiders. Brons (2015) outlined this process as the assignment of "some undesirable characteristic that the other/out-group has and the self/in-group lacks" (p. 70), converting cultural differences into indicators of inherent inferiority that bolstered community unity around a sense of shared cultural superiority. Bhavika's (EA7) story showed that labeling goes beyond just targeting one person; it can even damage the whole family by making numerous siblings feel bad about themselves. She talked about how her younger brother was made fun of for his mother's non-Haryanvi origin and their family's love for rice and other "outsider" cuisine. Friends also made fun of his height and skin color. Othering in this case was "a way of putting people in social positions" rather than a personal dispute, which caused problems for everyone in their family, no matter what their unique traits were.

Spatial and social exclusion worked with verbal labeling to develop systems for enforcing various boundaries. Gagan's (EA1) experience showed how exclusion worked through invading people's homes and personal spaces watching them conduct intimate things. A group of locals came into their family's house, saw his mother cooking rice and fish, and threw the pot out, saying, "Why do you people keep eating *keede makode* (insects) all the time? Don't you realize that our society is vegetarian?" This spatial infringement showed how enforcing communal boundaries may invade private places, turning family cultural practices into public community issues that needed intervention. The episode exhibited Brons's (2015) assertion that othering establishes "a near impenetrable border between the self/in-group and the inferior and/or radically alien other/out-group, 'justifying' social exclusion, discrimination, and/or subjection" (p. 72). Badal's (EA6) experience, however, demonstrated how exclusion was implemented through the assignment of status in shared leisure activities. His upper-caste peers on the cricket field referred to him as "chhotu," a term that denoted a low-status boy, while his Chamar caste friends used his proper name to call him. This differential naming practice within the same social space exemplified how exclusion was perpetuated through micro-hierarchies that positioned individuals differently based on caste and familial background while ensuring overall participation in community activities.

The intergenerational dimension of othering was revealed in Bhoomi's (EA5) narrative, where community members extended stigmatization to incorporate broader assessments of the legitimacy of her maternal background. As she elaborated, "It is not my mother's fault that she was compelled to move to Haryana following her marriage..." Her mother was unaware of the repercussions of such a marriage, and her in-laws characterized her maternal

background as “unknown” and her marital suitability as a risk that only a select few would have taken, while friends and relatives ridiculed her darker complexion and southern origin. The patterns of such othering were not often random; they were based on careful calculations that took into account both the mother’s background and the family’s caste standing. Bhavika’s (EA7) story showed how exclusion got worse at certain points in life, especially for young girls who were getting close to becoming teenagers. During Bhavika’s (EA7) teenage years, she went from playing outside to staying inside on her mother's suggestion to prevent getting mentally hurt. This gendered aspect showed how differential patterns of othering interacted with cultural norms about women’s freedom of movement and safety, making it impossible to partake in outdoor activities and make friends.

6.2.1.2 Negotiating Othering. CRMF emerging adults used a variety of techniques to oppose, adapt to, or strategically negotiated their othering, while asserting alternative frameworks for interpreting their family backgrounds and social statuses respecting local hierarchical systems. Direct resistance emerged as one approach through which some of them challenged such practices. Gagan (EA1) noted that his younger brother “didn't let people treat him like that. He answered them back. He gave it back to them in their own words.” This confrontational approach demonstrated resistance that sought to establish respect through strength while potentially escalating conflict affecting their family position within community networks. Reframing strategies served as a means of resistance aimed at challenging stigmatization through alternative interpretations, all while steering clear of direct confrontation. Bhavika (EA7) told her brother, “We aren’t accountable for these issues, and what if our parents had a CRM?” It highlighted normalization, urging family members to perceive CRM as an acceptable choice instead of a source of stigma for them. Ramu’s (EA17) assertive resistance during a school conflict was exemplified by his use of personal knowledge and maternal family background to challenge stereotypes. He responded to a comment about his cross-regional origin by asking, “Have you ever been to Bengal? I have. People who are related to my mother reside there.” This response demonstrated how certain emerging adults utilized their maternal background knowledge and familial connections as “resources” to challenge discrimination while simultaneously expressing pride in their cross-regional heritage. Digital spaces provided alternative options for expressing one’s identity that were not limited by local boundary enforcements. “Facebook, Instagram, *sab hai*. I have more than 300 Facebook acquaintances. No one is aware of my origins on social media. There is no village, no caste. I am capable of assuming the identity of any individual I want,”

Ramu (EA17) told. He did, however, recognize the constraints: “However, in reality, it is not that simple. People ask, “What is your name? Which caste do you belong to? From which state does your mother originate?”

Kaali (EA14) kept her movements to a school-home loop and avoided mentioning her mother’s origin unless directly asked, while Gagan (EA1) and Kapil (EA4) preferred not to speak about their mothers in peer settings at all. Ganesh (EA2) described feeling “a bit ashamed” of his mother’s accent in front of friends limiting her contact with them to avoid possible awkward situations. Withdrawal and self-imposed isolation also emerged as protective strategies prioritizing personal safety over their social participation. As Gagan (EA1) explained: “I have grown up inside the house since childhood… I would never go out to play.” This withdrawal was a response to his constant harassment that showed how mechanisms of othering succeeded in making isolation feel safer than facing continued discrimination.

Overall, these strategies reduced direct insults but also made their social world smaller, showing how othering actually worked. Ramu’s (EA17) experience demonstrated the complex yet mixed nature of negotiating otherness for some participants. He described having “a mixed childhood. On the one hand, I was never completely excluded from village life. On the other, I could never fully ignore that my mother was considered an outsider.” He further reflected: “No one really treated me differently. Everyone knew my mother was from outside. There were jokes at times, made by friends, but they were merely local things.” This account revealed how some emerging adults successfully navigated othering through maintaining social participation while acknowledging and managing the ongoing reality of their outsider positioning.

The effectiveness of their negotiation strategies was significantly mediated by intersectional positioning, particularly the intersection of cross-regional origin stigma with caste status and economic resources. Karambir (EA11), an Ahir from a landowning family, reported no such marginalization: “We are Ahirs. We have land. People knew our family. That was enough.” His brother, Dharma (EA12), echoed the same sentiments. He reflected, without land or reputation, “people might treat them differently,” if their mother was from far away. This observation confirmed how economic and social capital could mitigate the effects of cross-regional origin stigma, illustrating how negotiation strategies operated within broader structural constraints that affected their potential effectiveness.

6.2.2 Knowing What's Missing

The narratives of CRMF emerging adults revealed numerous structural constraints that shaped their life trajectories. This consciousness to them operated not as an abstract recognition of inequality but as embodied understanding of how economic precarity, educational deficits, social isolation, and family instability interacted to limit their opportunities. Their accounts demonstrated what Bourdieu (1986) recognized as systematic deficits in economic, cultural, and social capital that distinguished their families from more advantaged households. The concept of "knowing what's missing" emerged as a framework through which they understood their position within local social hierarchies and opportunity structures. This knowledge operated simultaneously as a burden and a resource. Awareness of constraints created frustration and limited aspirations, yet it also enabled strategic thinking about navigating disadvantages and developing adaptive responses to structural limitations

6.2.2.1 Inherited Constraints. CRMF emerging adults articulated a clear understanding of the inherited constraints that shaped their life trajectories from birth as these disadvantages they neither chose nor created but were required to navigate from their earliest experiences. These inherited deficits encompassed systematic limitations in economic resources, parental educational capital, lack of extended kinship networks, and social positioning that created baseline disadvantages affecting every subsequent decision about schooling, employment, and future planning. Their accounts revealed how these constraints operated individually and in combination with limiting opportunities while requiring constant strategic navigation of structural barriers. Economic precarity emerged as the most immediate and persistent inherited constraint, affecting families' capacity to invest in education, maintain stable households, and plan for long-term advancement. For some, these constraints were stark and undeniable. Badal (EA6), a Chamar, linked his curtailed education directly to his caste-linked disadvantage: "We are from a lower caste and lack the resources to continue our education. We are required to secure employment as soon as possible." His family's caste positioning is intersected with economic constraints to create compounded disadvantages that affected his educational and employment opportunities. The economic burden often fell disproportionately on mothers, whose income from domestic labor became crucial for family survival despite their own marginalized positioning within local communities. Babli (EA8) recalled her father's alcoholism draining household income while her mother's domestic labor kept the family afloat: "Most of the money would disappear… Ma cleaned and cooked

in the homes of others. She never complained. Somehow, we managed to survive." This recognition of maternal sacrifice created further complex emotional dynamics where appreciation for mothers' contributions coexisted with awareness of the structural limitations that made such sacrifice necessary. Household debt and financial instability were additional layers of economic constraints that affected their family's reputation and social positioning within local communities. Rohtash (EA15) described a household economy entangled in debt, where his mother bore the brunt of creditors' anger: "My father takes money and doesn't return it. Then people shout at us, not him." Extended family obligations also complicated economic circumstances by expanding financial responsibilities beyond immediate household needs. Devansh (EA10) explained: "There are five of us living in the house, and my father's two younger brothers also live with us. One of them has a disability and never got married. The other... I don't know why, but he is also unmarried. So, the whole load is on my parents." Health crises and disability within families have already strained limited resources while requiring caregiving affecting further educational and employment opportunities. Bhavika's (EA7) case illustrated how her father's accident and long-term disability strained the household: "After that, he could not work. We spent a lot on his treatment. I stayed home more and more." Her experience demonstrated how health emergencies could transform family circumstances while creating new constraints on individual mobility and advancement opportunities. Despite these economic constraints, they consistently recognized their mothers' enormous contributions to family survival and advancement. Ganesh (EA2) acknowledged: "My mother raised me from the very beginning. Although the salary is modest, she has effectively managed all responsibilities. I never had to withdraw from school due to financial constraints." Babita (EA3) described her mother's central role: "My mother has been the one working for this family, taking care of all of us. She even paid part of my sister's wedding expenses from her savings." Bhoomi (EA5) expressed gratitude that encompassed both appreciation and awareness of structural constraints: "Ma has done everything for us. She came from so far and worked in houses; now we want to do something for her." Such accounts demonstrated how mothers' income generation and resource management became crucial for their family advancement, revealing the additional burdens placed on women who already faced marginalization due to their outsider status.

The educational capital deficit represented another crucial inherited constraint that affected families' capacity to navigate institutional systems and advocate for children's

advancement. As Lamont and Lareau (1988) demonstrate, cultural capital encompasses not only educational credentials but also familiarity with dominant cultural codes, institutional knowledge, and social skills that facilitate interaction with educational and professional gatekeepers. Even in households with caste privilege, the absence of parental educational capital diluted their traditional advantages by limiting parents' ability to effectively engage with schools, understand educational pathways, or provide children with the cultural competencies valued in formal institutional settings. Devansh (EA10), a Jat from a historically dominant caste, admitted: "I have not yet decided on a college… My parents are not well-educated, so they cannot guide me properly. I speak to my friends on the phone, ask what they are planning, and perhaps I will simply accompany them wherever they go." The educational gap also proved stark and systematic across CRMF households, with survey data showing mothers' education averaging only 1.81 on a six-point scale, well below middle school completion, and fathers similarly undereducated. Without extended maternal kin networks nearby, families lacked fallback support systems to guide their children through admissions processes, scholarship applications, or competitive examinations that could provide pathways to advancement. Rakesh (EA13) captured this procedural vacuum: "Nobody at home really knows what to do for college… My parents are doing their best. That's why they want me to study and learn English well." His account revealed how educational aspirations coexisted with procedural uncertainty, where motivation for advancement exceeded knowledge about achieving educational goals.

The absence of social capital represented a third dimension of their inherited constraints that affected their families' capacity to access opportunities, navigate institutional systems, and build supportive networks for advancement. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) identified social capital as comprising structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions that facilitated access to resources through network connections. Without extended maternal kinship networks and with limited integration into local community systems, CRMFs often lacked the connections that could provide information, advocacy, and support during crucial life transitions and opportunity navigation to them.

6.2.2.2 Created Barriers. Beyond inherited constraints, CRMF emerging adults faced additional created barriers that disrupted their schooling, created family instability, and damaged their family reputations. The barriers did not simply continue to exist with disadvantages. Instead, they actively created new problems through household crises, local

social conflicts, and how individuals responded to difficult situations. Schooling disruption represented a primary mechanism through which inherited constraints translated into created barriers that affected long-term advancement opportunities. For some, schooling was curtailed not only by economic limitations but by competing demands on time and energy that prioritized immediate survival over long-term investment. Bhoomi (EA5) left school early, partly due to her disinterest in academics and partly to assist her parents in agricultural work. Soon after, her father arranged marriage to a boy in a nearby village. The marriage ended in divorce after episodes of violence and pressure to support her husband's alcoholism: "I was unable to endure his treatment… I desired a divorce." This sequence revealed how educational curtailment could lead to early marriage arrangements creating additional challenges and constraints. Educational uncertainty and lack of guidance further created additional forms of disruption that affected academic performance and long-term planning capacity. Ramu (EA17) described an uneven educational journey: "I was unaware of the purpose of my studies. Nobody informed me… Nevertheless, I did not completely withdraw. I just kept going." Although he completed his degree, he remained at a crossroads without stable employment: "It feels like I am at a crossroads." It illustrated how educational completion without clear direction or support could create uncertainty about future pathways and career development.

Family instability often compounded educational disruptions through creating household environments that prioritized crisis management over long-term planning and educational support. Rohtash (EA15) recalled creditors shouting at his mother over his father's unpaid debts. Such experiences created emotional stress and household tension that affected their capacity to focus on educational advancement while creating reputational challenges that could affect community acceptance and support. Keshav (EA16) and Babli (EA8) similarly navigated the ill-reputed and emotional consequences of alcoholism, violence, and economic insecurity that created an unstable household environment affecting educational performance and future planning capacity. Karambir (EA11) and Dharma (EA12) experienced early disengagement from school and absence of encouragement at home that led to irregular, informal employment without clear advancement pathways. As Dharma (EA12) explained: "I just find some work here and there. Nothing permanent. No one at home ever said, 'Study more, get a better job." Their accounts revealed how lack of educational encouragement could create employment instability while limiting access to formal sector opportunities that could provide economic security and advancement.

The interaction between inherited constraints and created barriers often produced cumulative disadvantages that exceeded the sum of their individual limitations (Bourdieu, 1986). Households already lacking educational capital proved less able to buffer the impact of sudden crises, health emergencies, or family instability. The comparative dimension revealed how institutional support systems could potentially mitigate the impact of created barriers on individual advancement opportunities. While children of CBMs in East Asian contexts might face similar challenges with family instability and educational disruption, state-led integration programs provided institutional buffers that reduced the cumulative impact of individual constraints (Lu & Yeung, 2024; Kim, 2017). In South Korea, multicultural family support centers provided Korean language classes, tutoring, and counseling for children of these international marriages, with specialized programs for students from multicultural families including Korean language education, math, reading and writing support, and guides to help students adapt to elementary school and the Korean education system. In Taiwan, targeted programs like "the Torch Program" supported new immigrants' societal integration through local primary schools, while schools with more than 10% or 100 new immigrant children were designated as "Schools for New Immigrant Children" and entitled to apply for family funds, counseling services, mother tongue learning programs, and multicultural events (Chen, 2020). In rural North Indian context, the absence of such institutional support systems meant that created barriers often intensified inherited constraints rather than providing opportunities for mitigation or advancement. Without state-sponsored integration programs, educational support systems, or targeted intervention strategies, CRMFs relied primarily on individual and family resources that were already constrained by structural disadvantages. This institutional vacuum created feedback loops where disadvantage was not only transmitted across generations but actively reproduced through the lived realities of disrupted education, unstable family economies, and social penalties associated with being marked as "different" within local communities.

6.2.3 Aspirational Horizon with Bounded Agency

The aspirational narratives of CRMF emerging adults revealed complex processes of imagining futures that balanced desire against perceived possibility. Unlike experiences of external othering or community evaluation, their accounts centered on internal horizons and how they imagined moving forward while navigating agency within structural constraints. Drawing on Appadurai's (2004) concept of the "capacity to aspire," this theme engages with

how they developed aspirational maps with "bounded agency" (Evans, 2007) while operating within the specific structural and familial contexts. Their aspirations were neither absent nor unlimited but systematically bound by inherited constraints and created barriers that required constant navigation and strategic adaptation. They articulated hopes for education, employment, and personal development, but these aspirations were consistently tempered by limited procedural knowledge, economic precarity, and the absence of extended kinship support networks that could provide guidance and opportunity access. Their narratives revealed not passive acceptance of limitation but active processes of pragmatic adaptation.

Bounded agency as "a process in which future possibilities are envisaged in the contingencies of the present moment" emerged as a central framework that balanced desires of CRMF emerging adults with structural limitations they faced (Evans, 2007). This boundedness operated as their navigation strategy that enabled realistic planning while maintaining motivation. They described aspirations that shifted from broad possibilities during adolescence to increasingly specific goals as they encountered structural barriers. This temporal narrowing reflected strategic adaptation that enabled continued forward movement within realistic parameters.

6.2.3.1 Imagining Futures Within Reach. CRMF emerging adults articulated their future aspirations through a careful balance of ambition with pragmatism, weighing personal desires against structural feasibility and family expectations. Their aspirations operated through strategic assessment of what remained possible within their circumstances. Babita (EA3) exemplified this calibrated approach through her aspiration to work before marriage, which she framed not as opposition to matrimonial expectations but as preparation for better positioning within marriage arrangements: "I told my parents to let me finish my graduation first. I want to work. If I earn something… I will feel more confident going into a marriage." Her articulation revealed an understanding of how employment could enhance her positioning within marriage negotiations while demonstrating strategic alignment with family expectations rather than direct challenge to traditional patterns. This approach resonated with broader patterns among CRMF daughters who negotiated between educational advancement and matrimonial timing through strategic compromise rather than confrontation. Educational uncertainty and procedural knowledge gaps seemed to be other dimensions affecting how they imagined their advancement possibilities. Ramu (EA17) articulated this uncertainty through his self-description as being "at a crossroads" after completing his degree: "I have

completed my undergraduate studies; however, I am uncertain about my next steps." His uncertainty reflected not indecision but structural absence of guidance systems and limited exposure to pathways beyond his rural context that could provide direction for advancement. The procedural literacy gaps that affected CRMFs created systematic limitations on aspirational horizons that extended beyond individual capacity to encompass family-level knowledge deficits. Even when parents possessed motivation to support their children's advancement, they often lacked institutional knowledge necessary for navigation of higher education, scholarship applications, or career development pathways that could expand opportunity access.

Caste privilege proved insufficient to overcome these educational capital deficits. Devansh (EA10), whose family-owned land and possessed dominant-caste status, admitted: "I have not yet decided on a college… My parents are not well-educated, so they cannot guide me properly. I speak to my friends on the phone, ask what they are planning, and perhaps I will simply accompany them wherever they go." His reliance on peer networks rather than family guidance revealed how educational capital gaps could undermine traditional advantages while creating uncertainty about crucial life transitions. For some, aspirations were strategically framed as incremental steps rather than major leaps, reflecting realistic assessment of family capacity and structural limitations. Rakesh (EA13) articulated this incremental approach through his focus on English language improvement before considering further education: "Nobody at home really knows what to do for college… My parents are doing their best. That's why they want me to study and learn English well." The emphasis on English language proficiency reflected broader patterns among rural youth who identified language skills as symbolic resources that could bridge constrained local horizons with expanded opportunity access. They developed bounded agency shaped by the absence of a bridging capital that other locally advantaged families possessed. Without extended kinship networks or institutional knowledge to guide admissions, scholarships, and employment opportunities, Bhoomi (EA5) and few others navigated decisions alone: "Nobody from my father's family guided me. I just followed what was closest at hand." This guidance deficit created realistic but narrow horizons that limited exposure to broader opportunity structures.

In contrast to South Korean and Taiwanese contexts where state programs provided language tutoring, vocational guidance, and multicultural family centers to expand perceived options, rural Haryana's complete institutional absence meant aspirations operated primarily

within known limitations rather than exploring unknown possibilities, reflecting structural inequalities rather than individual capacity differences.

6.2.3.2 Navigating Instability and Relational Tensions. The aspirational horizons of CRMF emerging adults were also shaped by ongoing instability and relational tensions that complicated future planning. These dynamics reflected both universal features of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004) and particular intensification within CRMF contexts characterized by economic precarity, family tensions, and limited institutional support. Emerging adults described precarious transitions between schooling, employment, and family responsibilities that required constant adaptation. This instability operated not as random disruption but as systematic feature of CRMF contexts that shaped decision-making processes and temporal planning horizons. Bhoomi's (EA5) trajectory illustrated how life transitions could involve multiple disruptions requiring decisive responses and adaptive strategies. She narrated how she left school to assist with agricultural work, entered an arranged marriage, and eventually sought divorce after enduring violence: "I was unable to endure his treatment… I desired a divorce." Her life trajectory revealed how instability could create opportunities for agency expression alongside constraints, as individuals navigated difficult circumstances through decisive action. Her decision to seek divorce demonstrated agency emerging within constraint as reflective assessment of circumstances leading to bounded but determined action that prioritized individual welfare while acknowledging social consequences.

Employment instability represented another dimension of precarity that affected aspirational development and future planning capacity. Karambir (EA11) and his brother Dharma (EA12) both described movement between irregular employment opportunities without clear advancement pathways or stable income sources. Dharma (EA12) explained: "I just find some work here and there. Nothing permanent. No one at home ever said, 'Study more, get a better job.'" His account highlighted how absence of aspirational guidance within households could lead to piecemeal livelihood strategies rather than structured career development. This employment pattern reflected broader limitations within CRMF households where parents often lacked knowledge about formal sector opportunities or career advancement strategies that could provide direction for their children's employment decisions. Relational tensions between individual desires and family obligations created additional instability that required ongoing negotiation and strategic management. These tensions emerged particularly around issues of autonomy, relationship choices, and life

timing that reflected broader generational differences about appropriate life course patterns and individual decision-making authority within family structures. Keshav's (EA16) experience demonstrated how these tensions could escalate into rupture when individual desires conflicted directly with family expectations and authority structures. He described leaving the village to live with a partner while explicitly rejecting both parental authority and identity concealment: "I fled because I was unwilling to continue concealing my identity and my affections." His decision illustrated how tensions between individual desire and family obligations could erupt into decisive action that prioritized personal authenticity over family harmony.

More commonly, however, some described quieter negotiation processes that sought to manage relational tensions through strategic compromise rather than any direct confrontation. These negotiations involved delaying major life decisions, seeking modest employment opportunities, or attempting to contribute financially to households while preserving some degree of personal autonomy and decision-making authority. Babita (EA13) exemplified this strategic approach through carefully framing her aspiration to work before marriage not as rebellion against family expectations but as preparation for being a "better wife" within eventual marriage arrangements. This framing reflected strategic conformity that aligned individual goals with family norms while creating space for self-development and capacity building that could enhance future positioning within marriage relationships. The negotiation of relational tensions often operated within economic pressure contexts that intensified decision-making urgency while limiting available options for managing competing demands.

Families facing economic stress possessed limited capacity for supporting extended education or career exploration phases, creating pressure for immediate income generation that could conflict with longer-term advancement aspirations or individual development preferences. Their aspirational processes embodied bounded agency that neither surrendered to structural limitation nor transcended it but negotiated with it through daily practice and strategic decision-making within acknowledged limitations.

6.2.4 At the Crossroads

CRMF emerging adults occupied complex positions where aspirations for education, employment, and personal autonomy intersected with marriage market realities and family

expectations. Their positioning of being “at the crossroads” reflected a calculative process that weighed immediate opportunities against long-term marriageability while also managing gendered expectations and structural constraints. These crossroads revealed how marriageability functioned as organizing principle that influenced their educational choices, career decisions, and life timing in ways that demonstrated both constraint and agency. Their narratives revealed an understanding of how present choices affected their future opportunities, demonstrating temporal awareness that connected immediate decisions to long-term consequences for marriageability, family relationships, and social positioning.

6.2.4.1 Marriageability Shaping Career Choices. The career and educational decisions of CRMF emerging adults were systematically shaped by their understanding of how these choices would affect their positioning within local marriage markets. Rather than pursuing education and employment solely for personal fulfilment or economic advancement, they consistently articulated career decisions through frameworks that emphasized marriage market implications and reputational consequences. This strategic approach reflected how educational credentials and employment status functioned as forms of matrimonial capital that could enhance positioning within marriage negotiations or compensate for perceived disadvantages.

For most males, career advancement represented crucial pathway to marriage eligibility that could overcome barriers created by their mothers' outsider status or other family economic limitations. Badal (EA6) exemplified this strategic thinking through his pragmatic approach to educational and career choices. After realizing his grades would not secure him a medical school admission, he pursued a nursing diploma that allowed him to start earning quickly to support his aging mother and fund his younger brother’s college and private coaching expenses. He articulated the explicit connection between employment and marriageability: “If he (his younger brother) gets a government job, he will get favorable marriage offers.” His awareness of how family formation timing affected individual marriageability extended to an understanding that “no one wants to arrange a marriage with someone whose elder brother is still not married.” This recognition created additional pressure for career advancement that connected individual employment success to broader family marriageability, demonstrating how matrimonial considerations operated at household rather than merely individual levels.

Male participants consistently described career aspirations through frameworks that connected employment success to both marriageability and broader social acceptance with a

potential to counter stigma associated with their CRMF background. Gagan (EA1) linked his career aspirations directly to marriageability and social standing, hoping to relocate and secure "a good-paying job" so that "people can realize even a boy from such dire circumstances can rise." For him, employment represented both a mechanism for deferring marriage until he felt ready and a strategy for countering stigma attached to his family's cross-regional origins. The premium placed on government employment created particularly intense pressure as salaried secure work functioned as major decisive factor in the marriage market. Karambir (EA11) captured this dynamic bluntly: "No one wants to give away their daughter to us. Some say we do not have a government job. Others just find some other excuse." Despite possessing land and being from the influential Ahir caste, irregular and informal employment left him disadvantaged within marriage markets that prioritized publicly legible income streams over traditional assets. Dharma (EA12) echoed similar dynamics from his experience with intermittent employment, seeing marriage proposals stall despite family networks and caste standing: "*Sab kuch theek hai, bas koi ladki nahi mil rahi* (Everything is fine except I can't find a girl)." His recognition of broader demographic pressures that "there is a shortage of women; we all know that" revealed understanding of how scarcity amplified premium on men who could display steady, recognized employment status.

For female participants, career decisions often functioned as strategies for enhancing marriageability while managing marriage timing pressures that emphasized and honor family reputation over professional achievements. Babita (EA3) used her graduation as a mechanism for postponing her marriage while building capacity potentially enhancing her confidence and positioning within eventual marriage arrangements: "Let me finish my graduation first. I want to work. If I earn something and stand on my own feet, I will feel more confident going into a marriage." Her approach required family support, particularly from her mother, who provided crucial advocacy with their relatives who questioned her Assamese background during her elder sister's marriage negotiations, demonstrating how maternal support could as well enable alternative life course strategies. Babli's (EA8) reflection on her marriage outcome demonstrated how educational credentials and fair skin functioned as marriage market assets facilitating advantageous arrangements: "People tend to value fair skin and educational degrees. I had both, so my marriage was arranged easily." Her experience revealed how successful navigation of marriage markets particularly required combination of valued characteristics compensating for potential disadvantages while creating competitive

positioning within local matrimonial systems. Even after marriage, these market-led logics continued to operate through family networking and marriage facilitation for younger siblings, as Babli (EA8) noted when she helped to find matches for her younger sister: “For girls like us, these things matter more.”

6.2.4.2 Preference for Locally Sanctioned Unions. CRMF emerging adults consistently expressed preferences for locally sanctioned marriages that operated within established caste, regional, and cultural boundaries. This preference represented not just simple adherence to tradition, but a calculated strategy designed to avoid stigma, social friction, and adjustment burdens they had witnessed in their parents’ CRMs and experienced themselves. Kapil (EA4) articulated this preference unequivocally: “I do not believe if I wish to marry someone from outside Haryana again. I have witnessed the detrimental effects on a family when the woman is not accepted.” His rejection of CRM arrangements was grounded in his lived observation of domestic conflicts between his parents, his mother’s complete social isolation, and the subtle social distancing he had practiced protecting his own community standing. For him, a local marriage meant his future wife would be socially embedded from the outset, sparing both her and their children an outsider labeling that had affected his own life experiences. Badal (EA6) echoed similar logic from his lower-caste Chamar family position: “If I decide to marry someone like my father did, my brother will also have to marry in a similar way, which I do not want.” His preference for a local Chamar caste bride reflected broader kinship strategy aimed at ensuring both brothers could marry without compounded difficulty of negotiating multiple cross-regional unions within contexts where caste endogamy and local familiarity remained powerful gatekeeping mechanisms. Dharma (EA12) articulated the structural dimensions of marriage market challenges that affected CRMFs despite apparent local integration: “No one wants to give away their daughter… Even though we are well known in the village, no girl is being found.” While he and his brother insisted, they had not faced overt discrimination due to their mother’s cross-regional origin, they recognized unspoken hesitation within marriage markets that local matches could potentially circumvent through alignment with normative marriage scripts.

The preference for locally sanctioned unions was not universal but represented a dominant pattern that reflected pragmatic assessment of social advantages associated with conventional marriage arrangements. Female participants generally expected to marry locally and framed this as advantageous pathway providing them smoother social integration and acceptance within marriage relationships. Babita (EA3) and Babli (EA8) married or expected

to marry locally, viewing this as preferable approach for women who could more easily gain acceptance when fitting local ideals regarding caste positioning, physical appearance, and linguistic competence. Bhoomi's (EA5) reflection on her mother's struggles as a South Indian bride in Haryana, included taunts from in-laws and ongoing cultural adjustment challenges, informed that future marriage arrangements would involve someone from nearby areas where she could "at least understand the people." This preference reflected both desires to minimize cultural adjustment burdens and recognition of how cultural familiarity could enhance marriage relationship success and social integration.

The underlying calculation remained consistent: local marriage was seen as a protective strategy against the double burden of proving oneself as both competent spouse and legitimate community member. This dual burden reflected their lived experience of witnessing maternal marginalization and experiencing their own exclusion throughout development. Choosing locally sanctioned unions also represented intergenerational repair designed to ensure their children would not face similar marginalization that had characterized their own childhood experiences. The preference for local matches also reflected their desire to minimize cultural and emotional labor expected of marriage partners, particularly wives who bore primary responsibility for cultural adaptation within patrilocal marriage systems. Having witnessed their mothers' adjustment challenges including learning new dialects, food preparation methods, and kinship etiquette while managing social isolation, many of them sought to reduce such burdens for their future spouses. However, this preference operated within tension created by demographic realities that continued to limit local marriage options. The same sex-ratio imbalance that had driven their fathers toward CRMs remained operative, creating uncertainty about whether locally sanctioned unions would remain feasible. Some acknowledge that demographic pressures might ultimately force them toward CRMs they hoped to avoid, creating ongoing anxiety about marriage timing and opportunity availability.

6.2.4.3 Gendered Marriageability Concerns and Timing Pressures. Marriage timing and marriageability concerns operated through highly gendered frameworks that created different expectations, pressures, and strategic considerations for male and female CRMF emerging adults. These gendered patterns reflected broader patriarchal norms within rural North Indian context while being intensified by specific challenges associated with CRMF backgrounds and marriage market positioning that required additional strategic navigation and timing considerations. For female participants, marriage timing operated

through frameworks that emphasized youth, family reputation, and protective strategies designed to “settle” daughters before they became perceived as “too old” for local marriage markets. This temporal urgency created pressure for early marriage arrangements that often conflicted with their educational aspirations and career development goals, requiring negotiation and family advocacy to create space for individual advancement while managing community expectations about appropriate marriage timing. The emphasis on early marriage for them reflected concerns about family honor and social positioning that connected individual marriage timing to broader family reputation and social standing within community networks. Parents and extended family members often expressed eagerness to begin marriage arrangements as soon as daughters reached socially acceptable marriage ages, regardless of their education completion or career preparation that may have enhanced their long-term marriage outcomes.

Educational credentials and physical appearance functioned as crucial variables that also affected marriage timing and arrangement processes for female participants. Those possessing valued characteristics of fair skin, educational degrees, and family economic resources, often experienced easier marriage arrangements but also faced pressure to capitalize on these advantages while they remained socially valuable within marriage market calculations. Babli’s (EA8) marriage experience demonstrated how appearance and education functioned as decisive factors: “People tend to value fair skin and educational degrees. I had both, so my marriage was arranged easily.” However, her in-laws’ expectation that she remains housewife despite her educational credentials revealed ongoing limitations on their post-marriage autonomy and career development affecting their long-term relationship dynamics and personal satisfaction. For participants whose appearance did not conform to local beauty ideals, particularly those with darker skin complexions, timing pressures intensified through concerns that a delayed marriage might further limit options within marriage markets. This dynamic created additional urgency around marriage arrangements conflicting with their educational and career development goals while reflecting broader patterns of colorism and beauty standards within marriage markets (Kukreja, 2018).

Male participants, however, faced inverted timing logic that created pressure to delay marriage until achieving economic stability and career security enhancing their attractiveness within marriage markets. Rather than experiencing urgency for early marriage, they were consistently advised that they must first “become something” through educational

achievement and employment success before pursuing any marriage arrangements. This delayed marriage expectation created different forms of pressure that connected individual career advancement to marriage eligibility while creating anxiety about achieving sufficient economic security within socially acceptable timeframes. The emphasis on government employment as marriage market prerequisite created particular challenges for especially those who struggled to access such positions. Karambir (EA11) and Dharma (EA12), already in their mid-twenties, had yet to receive serious marriage proposals, with rejections typically framed through concerns about their lack of government employment rather than direct references to their family backgrounds or social positioning. This pattern revealed how economic criteria could function as socially acceptable mechanisms for marriage market exclusion while masking other forms of discrimination or preference operating within family decision-making processes. Badal's (EA6) awareness of how unmarried status could affect family marriageability demonstrated additional complexity within male marriage timing: "No one wants to arrange a marriage with someone whose elder brother is still not married."

These gendered timing patterns reflected broader cultural frameworks that connected male marriageability to economic provider capacity while linking female marriageability to youth, beauty, and family reputation. Within CRMF contexts, these standard expectations were complicated by additional concerns about family background acceptance and social positioning affecting their marriage arrangement success and post-marriage integration within extended family and community networks. For male participants, the expectation to achieve economic stability before marriage operated within contexts where traditional advantages, caste positioning, landholding, or family reputation, seemed insufficient to overcome concerns about maternal outsider status or family social positioning. While female participants navigated tensions between family pressure for early marriage and personal aspirations for educational or career development enhancing their positioning within marriage arrangements. Successful negotiation of these tensions, as demonstrated by Babita's (EA3) strategic approach, required family support and careful framing of individual goals as preparation for better marriage outcomes rather than opposition to marriage expectations.

Both patterns operated within contexts where marriageability was conceptualized not as an open choice field but as tightly regulated status measured against caste-inflected ideals of appropriate ideal match characteristics.

Conclusion

The analysis of interviews with emerging adults revealed that they understood marriageability as an organizing principle that shaped their identity formation and aspirations. In rural North India, where marriage marks social adulthood and family advancement, marriageability operated as an internalized framework through which young people assessed their choices and planned for future. Their narratives further revealed their understanding of how educational credentials, employment, appearance, and family background functioned as social capital within local marriage markets, where they strived to navigate these dynamics while pursuing advancement and maintaining family relationships.

Social interactions with peers, teachers, community members, and extended family members emerged as crucial sites where their marriageability was continuously negotiated. These encounters shaped their understanding of their social positioning while they worked to influence these perceptions of themselves and their families. Available resources—economic, educational, social, and cultural—both enabled and constrained their aspirational development, affecting objective opportunities and subjective assessments of possibilities within particular circumstances.

Their accounts revealed four interconnected processes through which they described and navigated their positioning: managing “othered” status within community networks, developing awareness of “what's missing” in terms of resources and opportunities, calibrating aspirations with “bounded agency,” and making decisions while positioned “at the crossroads” of competing demands and possibilities. These processes operated through the processes of bounded agency (Evans, 2007; Mahmood, 2001), a mode of self-understanding and aspiration formation that neither surrenders to structural limitation nor transcends it entirely but actively negotiates with constraint through daily practice and strategic adaptation. This framework also revealed how their sense of self and marriageability developed through interaction between individual interpretation and structural positioning rather than through either pure personal choice or complete social determination.

Discussion and Recommendations

This concluding chapter synthesizes the empirical findings of this dissertation to illuminate the complex realities of CRMFs in rural North India while proposing practical recommendation for intervention. Drawing on comprehensive data from 497 families across 52 villages in the region of Narnaul and detailed interviews with 76 participants, this chapter demonstrates how systematic analysis of socio-economic positioning, community evaluation processes, and emerging adult experiences can inform both theoretical understanding and practical solutions for addressing marginalization faced by CRMFs while fostering community acceptance.

The chapter is organized into two interconnected sections. The discussion section weaves together quantitative and qualitative findings to address the three fundamental research questions that guided this investigation, revealing how structural disadvantages, social evaluations, and individual agency intersected in shaping life outcomes for CRMFs. This analysis extends beyond description to theoretical contribution, showing how patterns of sympathetic stratification, anticipatory social evaluation, and bounded agency illuminate broader processes of social change. While the recommendations section translates these empirical insights into a comprehensive framework for establishing multicultural family centers adapted from their successful international model from South Korea yet grounded in local realities and needs of this rural North Indian context.

Together, these two sections make it clear how rigorous empirical research can bridge the gap between scholarly understanding and practical intervention, offering both theoretical contributions to the sociology of family, and marriage migration and suggest new ways for creating more inclusive and equitable approaches to enhancing cultural diversity in rural India. The proposed multicultural family centers represent not merely service delivery mechanisms but fundamental reconceptualization of how communities can transform their demographic challenges into opportunities for mutual enrichment and social development.

Discussion

This dissertation examined CRMFs in Narnaul through three fundamental research questions that explored their socio-economic positioning, community evaluation processes, and emerging adults' sense of self formation and perceived marriageability. It drew on a mixed-

methods research design that evolved organically from an initial qualitative design to encompass socio-economic and demographic analysis of 497 CRMFs and qualitative interviews with 76 participants.

The methodological evolution of this dissertation reflects the adaptive nature of contemporary sociological research and the researcher's reflexive engagement with field realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Initially conceived as biographical narrative research following Polish sociological traditions, it transformed into embedded mixed-methods research when pilot fieldwork revealed substantial challenges in accessing emerging adults and gathering comprehensive demographic data. This methodological adaptation, guided by Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner's (2007) framework for mixed-methods research, ultimately enhanced the dissertation's analytical rigor by integrating quantitative patterns with rich qualitative narratives. The collaboration with a female field research assistant emerged as a pragmatic solution to gender-based access constraints, enabling systematic identification of 497 CRMFs across 52 villages while maintaining cultural appropriateness in data collection documented in the Chapter 3.

My positionality as a young male researcher from the same region provided both advantages and disadvantages throughout the research process. Shared caste background (Ahir) and linguistic fluency in Haryanvi facilitated rapport with Sarpanches and local government officials, while international academic credentials from Poland lent credibility to the research endeavor. However, cultural norms restricting cross-gender interaction with CRMF mothers, their emerging adult daughters, and combined with families' natural reluctance to expose their children to outsider scrutiny, necessitated careful navigation of this "insider-outsider" dynamics. The support of block-level government officials who issued formal endorsement letters for the data collection proved crucial in legitimizing the research, while informal networks established primarily through the female field researcher opened access to previously invisible populations. These methodological challenges and adaptations underscore the importance of reflexive positioning in research with marginalized communities and highlight how fieldwork realities shape analytical possibilities (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Between Margins and Mainstream

The quantitative analysis revealed systematic patterns of disadvantage that position CRMFs within the intersection of educational, social, economic, and spatial disadvantages that create unique vulnerabilities. CRMF mothers reported significantly lower educational attainment, with 28.3 percent having no formal education, translating into limited capacity to provide academic support for children and restricted access to formal employment opportunities (Chapter 4, Figure 22). Social capital deficits compounded these challenges: while 93 percent of them maintained natal family contact through phone calls, only 4 percent participated in SHGs, representing systematic exclusion from such primary institutions through which rural women access financial inclusion, leadership development, and a political voice (Chapter 4, Table 9). Geographic origins revealed that 51.7 percent of them originated from Uttar Pradesh, with additional contingents from Bihar (17.7 percent), Assam (16.7 percent), and West Bengal (13.5 percent), with distances of 500-800 kilometers that severed natal kin support networks traditionally crucial for their social positioning in rural contexts (Kaur, 2004; Chaudhry, 2016, 2019a; see Chapter 4, Table 6). These findings extended Crenshaw's (1989) and Arya and Rathore's (2019) intersectionality framework in the Indian context by demonstrating how cross-regional origins operated as an independent axis of stratification intersecting with caste, class, and gender and producing distinctive spatial patterns of exclusion. The findings also advanced the theoretical understanding of intersectionality in the Indian context by showing how spatial displacement amplified existing inequalities rather than simply adding another layer of disadvantage.

CRMF fathers' employment patterns further illustrated their household vulnerability: 61 percent worked in manual labor, 30.6 percent in farming, and 15.7 percent in driving, reflecting dependence on informal and unstable occupations that yielded volatile incomes (see Chapter 4, Figure 27). Statistical analysis further revealed significant associations between their employment statuses and caste compositions ($\chi^2 = 105.825$, $p < .001$), indicating that traditional occupational hierarchies continued to influence livelihood strategies even within constrained options available to CRMF households (see Chapter 4, Table 18). These patterns aligned with Bourdieu's (1986) analysis of how economic, cultural, and social capital deficits reinforce each other to perpetuate disadvantage across generations. The findings also resonated with Kaur's (2004, 2010) foundational work on CRMs that primarily involved economically marginalized families, while extending Kukreja's (2017,

2018b, 2021, 2024) analysis of how spatial displacement compounded existing vulnerabilities for the CRMF mothers in particular.

Differential Assessments of Family Positioning and Marriage Prospects

The qualitative analysis revealed how structural conditions translated into social evaluation processes through patterns of what can be characterized as "sympathetic stratification" (building on Lamont, 2012), whereby Sarpanches and other community members pragmatically accommodated CRMFs to address demographic shortages in their region while evaluating them as norm disruptors preserving traditional hierarchies. Sarpanches demonstrated this dynamic by showing acceptance of CRMFs as a demographic reality and evaluating them sympathetically yet simultaneously expressing concerns about caste-endogamy erosion. This conditional legitimacy resolved immediate demographic needs while ensuring CRMFs remained symbolically distinct from established local hierarchies, echoing Lamont's (2012) analysis of symbolic boundaries and social evaluation processes while extending Mishra's (2013, 2017) work on how communities managed marriage squeeze pressures. This analysis also contributed to the prevalent marriage market theory by refining classical economic models that predicted demographic scarcity empowering women's bargaining positions (Becker, 1981). Instead, communities managed marriage-squeeze pressures through conditional inclusions that permitted temporary accommodation while maintaining essential hierarchical distinctions. This process revealed how social boundaries adapted to demographic pressures without fundamentally challenging existing power structures, offering insights relevant to marriage migration contexts globally while building on Chowdhry's (2004a, 2004b, 2005) analysis of how the "crisis of masculinity" shaped community responses to CRMs.

CRMF parents engaged in strategies that can be understood as "anticipatory social evaluation" (Franks & Gecas, 1992), investing strategically in their children's education through English medium schools and cultural conformity enhancing their marriageability while mitigating inherited stigma and prejudice. They realized how local marriage markets worked, primarily from their own experiences, and thus, emphasized achievements of their children in schools and colleges signaling respectability while downplaying such family markers that generated questions about their authenticity. However, these strategic efforts operated within severe resource constraints well-documented quantitatively, limiting their

capacity to convert their aspirational strategies for their children into effective social mobilities.

Government officials, on the other hand, showed patterns of "administrative distance," acknowledging CRMFs' vulnerability while lacking targeted programming or institutional frameworks for support, creating policy invisibility compounding material deficits. This pattern aligned with Mukherjee's (2013, 2015) ethnographic findings about how institutional responses to CRMFs remain fragmented and inconsistent, while extending Kukreja and Kumar's (2013) observations about the lack of targeted interventions for these families and their children.

Narrating Self and Marriageability

Emerging adults displayed processes of identity construction under structural constraints, characterized by conscious strategizing about their social positioning within available opportunities. Almost all of them expressed their aspirations for locally sanctioned marriages, exhibiting what can be understood as their "bounded agency" (Evans, 2007; Mahmood, 2001), a strategic adaptation within constrained circumstances acknowledging both structural limitations and individual capacity for meaningful choices. The analysis further revealed how "othering" mechanisms operated through systematic labeling practices where community members addressed them by regional identifiers rather than their personal names, exemplifying Goffman's (1963) analysis of stigma's power to reduce individuals "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (p. 3), while agreeing with Kukreja (2018a). Spatial exclusion manifested in community's surveillance of cultural practices like dietary choices and cooking methods, while intersectional positioning created differentiated experiences where cross-regional origin stigma further intersected with their caste status and economic resources (Kukreja, 2018b; Mishra, 2017). Despite these structural constraints, they manifested bounded agency through digital spaces or in other ways that provided them alternative avenues for their identity expression, yet offline limitations persisted in marriage market negotiations as seen in some cases.

These findings extended McAdams and McLean's (2013) narrative identity concept by evidencing how family stories of displacement, albeit only of mothers, and resilience informed young adults' marriage strategies in intergenerational contexts (see M6, M7, and M17). CRMF Parents' accounts of exclusion and adaptation became interpretive frameworks

that their children used to construct coherent life stories and envision possible futures, reaffirming how narrative identity operated not merely as individual meaning-making but as collective family storytelling shaping strategic positioning across generations (see EA6, EA1, and EA16). These findings well aligned with the recent scholarship by Manisha and Ankit (2024) who documented migrant mothers' anxieties and worries about their children's futures in Jind and Mahendragarh districts, while extended Kukreja's (2018a) analysis of how stigmatization processes affect identity formation among CRMF children.

Situating CRMFs within East Asian Marriage Migration Contexts

Situating CRMF experiences within broader Asian contexts illuminated both distinctive features and shared patterns. In South Korea and Japan, Southeast Asian marriage migrants confront similar challenges to CRMF mothers including facing language barriers, prejudice and stigma, and educational discontinuities (Constable, 2005; Lan, 2008). However, state-sponsored multicultural family centers in South Korea have provided structured integration support through offering language classes, legal aid, and psychological counseling, achieving substantial improvements in migrant integration outcomes. South Korea's Multicultural Families Support Act (2008) mandates comprehensive services that have achieved significant user satisfaction, contrasting with North India's institutional invisibility and overreliance on informal networks. Critically, existing East Asian scholarship on these multicultural families has focused primarily on younger children's school performance, language acquisition, and health outcomes, while their parents remaining the analytical center of this scholarship (Kim, 2018; Lee & Oh, 2019; Park & Choi, 2020). This literature has failed to adequately examine how these children develop concerns about their own marriageability as they mature and how their bicultural heritage influences their romantic relationships within local marriage market hierarchies. This dissertation's focus on emerging adults' marriageability aspirations within North Indian context suggests that the East Asian scholarship would benefit from extending their analytical frameworks to include "emerging adult" experiences, particularly around their identity formation, peer relationships, and romantic aspirations that become increasingly salient during this distinctive phase of their lives (Arnett, 2000).

The findings also suggest how certain demographic solutions generate new forms of exclusion perpetuating across generations with particular relevance to the East Asian context where multicultural families are now producing second-generation adults.

Theoretical Contributions and Future Research Directions

This research advances three key analytical contributions that extend beyond the immediate Indian context. First, the analysis of intersecting disadvantages enriches intersectionality theory by incorporating spatial origin as an understudied axis of stratification, revealing how geographic displacement interacts with existing inequalities in ways that build on Crenshaw's (1989) foundational framework, but largely on Arya and Rathore's (2019) work, while extending it to other marriage migration contexts. Second, the findings on sympathetic stratification explain how communities manage demographic pressures through conditional inclusion preserving hierarchical distinctions while accommodating practical needs, contributes to the general marriage market theory that structural constraints do shape social boundaries. Third, the findings on bounded agency illuminate how emerging adults strategically navigate identity and aspiration horizons based on their structural awareness and family narratives, extending Appadurai's (2004) work on the "capacity to aspire" within certain rural contexts.

An emerging sphere of research may develop around the intersection of unemployment crises and marriage market transformations in rural Haryana. With unemployment rates significantly higher than national averages and villages reporting over 100 unmarried men, traditional marriage market logic faces unprecedented challenges (Chapter 5, Section 5.2.2). Sarpanches and government officials increasingly acknowledge that universal job scarcity may necessitate fundamental shifts in marriage criteria, potentially creating openings for CRMF acceptance if their children secure stable employment. This demographic reality suggests that economic achievement might override family background concerns, paralleling how severe bride shortages initially created space for CRMs despite cultural resistance. Moreover, persistent unemployment among local men may generate pressure for inter-caste marriages within communities, challenging endogamous norms that currently marginalize CRMFs (Chapter 5, Section 5.2.1). As traditional marriage pool constraints intensify, communities may experience "crisis-driven norm change" where economic pragmatism overrides cultural orthodoxy. This potential transformation warrants longitudinal investigation to understand whether current patterns represent transitional accommodation or fundamental restructuring of rural marriage systems. Such research could illuminate broader questions about how demographic pressures interact with economic constraints to reshape social boundaries and stratification systems.

Methodological Reflections with Research Limitations

While this dissertation provides comprehensive insights into CRMF experiences, several limitations suggest directions for future inquiry. The single district and block focus enables deep contextual understanding but constrains generalizability across Haryana and rural North India's diverse regional contexts. The cross-sectional design further limits critical understanding of how social positioning and marriageability dynamics evolve over time; longitudinal research tracking families and emerging adults across extended periods would rather have illuminated whether sympathetic stratification represented transitional accommodation or stable exclusion patterns. The focus on Hindu families reflected regional demographics, yet limited insights into how religious diversity intersected with cross-regional origins shaping social positioning. CRMFs are also common in Muslim-dominated regions of Haryana such as Mewat, a comparison with that context would have yielded more significant results.

The methodological evolution from qualitative to mixed-methods design, while enhanced analytical comprehensiveness, also created temporal disjunctions between data collection phases influencing comparative analysis. Future research should consider simultaneous data collection strategies that better integrate quantitative and qualitative components. Additionally, the cultural constraints that limited private access to emerging adults, particularly young women, suggest the need for innovative methodological approaches that can navigate gender norms while maintaining data quality and participant safety (Ankit, 2024). The dissertation's mixed-method design represented both a strength and source of important limitations. The cross-sectional survey cannot trace temporal dynamics of integration; a longitudinal panel would be necessary to assess whether CRMF children's marriageability improves with cohort maturation and cumulative exposure to local networks (see Chapter 4). Some economic measures remain incomplete, as systematic income and landholding data were not collected with the precision needed for causal modeling, limiting the scope of multivariate analysis (see Chapter 4). While life stories through in-depth narratives do offer rich subjective accounts, psychological outcomes require dedicated instruments and ethical handling beyond the scope of this current design.

Despite these limits, the integration of large-N mapping with 76 stakeholder interviews yielded a robust, triangulated evidence of how disadvantage is structured and

transmitted in CRMFs, contributing to broader scholarship on marriage migration, intersectionality, and social mobility in contemporary rural India.

The collaborative approach with the local female field researcher proved essential for this dissertation's success, highlighting the importance of methodological flexibility with locally appropriate research strategies (Sayer, 2010). This experience suggests broader implications for social research in contexts where cultural norms create access barriers, pointing toward more collaborative and culturally responsive research designs honoring local values while advancing analytical goals (Lawani, 2020).

By weaving quantitative patterns with rich narrative data and comparative analysis, this dissertation demonstrated that marriageability emerged not as a fixed individual endowment but as a socially constructed status produced through intergenerational narratives, intersectional disadvantage, and institutionally mediated evaluation (Bridges & Boyd, 2016). The analytical patterns identified – sympathetic stratification, anticipatory social evaluation, and bounded agency – offer more accurate and critical insights extending beyond specific Indian contexts and illuminating marriage migration dynamics across global settings where demographic pressures intersect with cultural preservation concerns and economic transformation.

Recommendations

The empirical findings of this dissertation reveal the complex challenges faced by CRMFs in rural North India while simultaneously confirming unprecedented opportunities for a transformative social change. Drawing on empirical evidence from 497 CRMFs and 76 stakeholder interviews across Narnaul block, I propose a comprehensive framework of interventions, in short, centered on establishing "multicultural family centers" with an inspiration from the South Korean context (Chung & Yoo, 2013; Bui, 2022; Jang, 2022) for addressing the multifaceted needs of CRMFs leveraging their cultural capital for broader community benefit. These recommendations are grounded in the CRMFs' systematic analysis of socio-economic characteristics (see Chapter 4), community's evaluation processes (see Chapter 5), and their emerging adults' identity formation with aspirational horizon (see Chapter 6).

Establishment of Haryana Multicultural Family Centers

The establishment of these multicultural family centers across villages in Haryana will represent a paradigm shift from viewing CRMs as only a social problem to recognizing them as a cultural opportunity, as happened in the East Asian contexts. These centers would serve as community hubs celebrating the diversity CRMFs bring while fostering community integration and moving beyond the current discourse of their accommodation to one of mutual enrichment. These centers would operate on the principle that cultural diversity strengthens communities rather than fragmenting them, challenging the pattern of "sympathetic stratification" by Sarpanches as village-elected leaders identified in this dissertation whereby communities pragmatically accommodated CRMFs, yet preserving revered traditional caste-based hierarchies. Drawing from South Korea's multicultural family support model, where 170 centers established by 2017 provided language training, counseling, and job placement services achieving 74 percent user satisfaction rates (Ministry of Health & Welfare, 2010), the proposed Haryana multicultural family centers can focus on three core pillars: cultural preservation and exchange, educational support, and economic empowerment. However, unlike the Korean model which emphasized only one-way assimilation, these Haryana centers can emphasize bidirectional cultural exchange, recognizing that local communities can benefit significantly from exposure to diverse regional cultures (Jang, 2022). These centers should be established at the village level, ensuring accessibility and community-based ownership. Their governance structure can involve collaborative approaches between Gram Panchayats, SHGs, and CRMF representatives, creating inclusive decision-making processes that prevent any further marginalization of CRMF voices. Each center can be managed by committees comprising village Sarpanches or other nominated representatives, with leaders from women's SHGs including some educated CRMF mothers, and community elders, primarily women. This governance model can ensure participatory development approaches while maintaining CRMFs' transition from being passive beneficiaries to active community stakeholders.

Cultural Integration and Language Preservation Programs

The research findings revealed that CRMF children navigate complex linguistic landscapes between their mothers' native languages (Bengali, Assamese, Odia), local Haryanvi dialect, and Hindi language as the medium of instruction in schools (see Chapter 6). Rather than viewing this multilingualism as a deficit requiring remediation, the multicultural family

centers can leverage it as valuable cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Bengali, Assamese, and Odia language classes among others can be conducted by a selected group of educated CRMF mothers themselves, further creating opportunities for their meaningful community-based education contributions and also preserving their linguistic heritage for their children, which was found to be lacking for most CRMFs. This multilingual approach carries significant practical benefits as India's economy becomes increasingly integrated. Proficiency in multiple Indian languages provides competitive advantages in tourism, translation services, interstate commerce, and government positions requiring regional expertise. The centers would thus reframe linguistic diversity of CRMF children as valuable skill sets rather than deficits, directly addressing the educational disadvantages documented in Chapter 4 where 28.3 percent of CRMF mothers lacked any formal education.

Educational Support and Economic Empowerment

Recognizing that most CRMF parents lack educational qualifications to provide academic support, these community-based multicultural family centers can establish community learning centers equipped with libraries, computer facilities, and study spaces. As one Sarpanch expressed: "I want to establish a proper library in our village for our children's development, but we lack the resources and expertise to set it up properly. If someone could help us create a learning center, it would benefit all families." These multicultural centers have the potential to fulfill this vision of the concerned Sarpanch by creating well-equipped learning spaces serving both CRMFs and local children from RMFs. For emerging adults possessing basic education but lacking essential employability skills, these centers with the help of external fundings can offer communication skills training in both Hindi and English, plus other interpersonal skills necessary for formal employment. As one emerging adult noted: "There are no proper jobs here. Even with some education, finding work is very difficult. People question our families, our backgrounds. Sometimes I think if I had a government job, things would be different for marriage prospects." Vocational training programs affiliated with established technical training institutes can be integrated with the centers offering further certifications in skills relevant to local economies.

Integration with SHGs and Opportunities in Local Governance

One of the striking research findings of this dissertation revealed that only 4 percent of CRMF women participate in SHGs, despite significant benefits these groups offer in financial

inclusion, social networking, and leadership development (see Chapter 4, Table 9). As one CRMF mother explained: “Other women go to their group meetings, get loans, learn new skills. We see them supporting each other, but we are never invited. We remain alone with our problems. Sometimes I think if we could join, our children's futures might be different.” The multicultural centers can prioritize integrating CRMF women into existing SHG structures while facilitating formation of specialized groups addressing unique needs and interests. Hsia documented how Taiwanese women and academics in 1995 created Chinese language literacy groups for Southeast Asian marriage migrants, which evolved into the TransAsia Sisters Association in Taiwan (TASAT) by 2003, demonstrating women in CBMFs united through collective empowerment and advocacy organizations to challenge state policies and support each other’s integration (Hsia, 2008). These groups provided a platform for these marriage migrants to move beyond individual struggles and develop collective identity, transforming from isolated newcomers into organized advocates who could articulate their needs and demand recognition. Through mutual support networks, they created spaces where shared experiences of marginalization became sources of strength, enabling them to challenge discriminatory policies while fostering community solidarity across linguistic and cultural differences. Integration processes within the Haryana multicultural family centers can begin with initial awareness campaigns educating CRMF women about SHG membership benefits, including microcredit access, skills training, and social support networks, and then taking their efforts toward collective empowerment and beyond.

Framework and Expected Impact

The implementation of Haryana multicultural family centers can follow phased approaches beginning with pilot programs in villages with significant CRMF populations. These Initial phases can focus on establishing centers in different blocks of districts with high CRM rates, such as Mahendragarh, Rewari, and Jhajjar districts in Haryana. Each pilot center would operate for minimum two years with comprehensive monitoring and evaluation assessing program effectiveness and community response. Financial sustainability can be ensured through diversified funding strategies combining government resources from existing schemes like National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, with community contributions including volunteer time and in-kind contributions, and private sector partnerships for corporate social responsibility initiatives.

Such centers can also generate income through their cultural tourism programs, catering services, and handicraft sales. At individual levels, such programs are expected to increase CRMF women's symbolic and social capitals, offer them economic opportunities, and provide leadership skills while improving their children's holistic development including their academic performance, identity formation, and self-confidence, among others. At community levels, these multicultural centers will foster greater cultural appreciation, social cohesion, and collective efficacy. Most significantly, centers could help transform Haryana's relationship with cultural diversity, moving from historically insular approaches to celebrating and leveraging diversity for community development.

Conclusion

This chapter has synthesized the empirical findings from three research questions examining CRMFs in rural Haryana, revealing how patterns of sympathetic stratification, anticipatory social evaluation, and bounded agency shape family experiences and emerging adult development. The discussion demonstrates that while these families face systematic disadvantages across educational, economic, and social dimensions, they also exercise strategic agency in navigating structural constraints and pursuing social mobility.

The analysis extends theoretical understanding by showing how spatial displacement operates as an axis of stratification that intersects with existing inequalities, how community evaluation processes maintain hierarchical boundaries while accommodating demographic needs, and how young people construct identity narratives within constrained circumstances. These findings contribute to broader scholarship on marriage migration, intersectionality, and social positioning in contemporary rural India.

The proposed multicultural family centers offer a comprehensive framework for transforming these insights into practical intervention. By establishing village-level centers that provide educational support, economic empowerment, and cultural integration programs, communities can move beyond current patterns of accommodation toward genuine inclusion that leverages cultural diversity for community development. The phased implementation approach, drawing on successful international models while adapting to local contexts, provides a realistic pathway for creating sustainable change that benefits both CRMFs and broader communities.

Together, discussion and recommendations demonstrate how rigorous empirical sociological research is applied in practice and inform practical solutions addressing marginalization and fostering community integration and social transformation. But any success of such interventions depends on recognizing CRMFs not as problems requiring management but as community assets whose cultural contributions and strategic capabilities can enrich rural development and social cohesion in the rural North Indian context and beyond.

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Appendix A

List of CRMF Mothers Interviewed

Code	CRMF Mother Pseudonym	Age	Educational Attainment (0 – 6)	Native State	Number of Years Married	CRMF Caste	Number of Children
M1	Mangla	30	3	Maharashtra	9	Khati	2
M2	Bulbul	21	0	Bihar	1	Chamar	0
M3	Jaya	36	3	Jharkhand	20	Ahir	2
M4	Wrinda	45	0	West Bengal	15	Ahir	2
M5	Wridha	38	0	West Bengal	16	Ahir	2
M6	Jagriti	35	4	Jharkhand	12	Ahir	2
M7	Umesh	25	3	UP	8	Ahir	2
M8	Umi	26	3	UP	3	Ahir	0
M9	Urmila	20	0	UP	5	Chamar	1
M10	Uma	28	4	UP	4	Brahmin	1
M11	Writu	50	0	West Bengal	27	Ahir	3
M12	Bhagyashree	30	0	Bihar	14	Doom	2
M13	Arti	38	2	Assam	18	Ahir	1
M14	Kishori	42	3	Karnataka	23	Ahir	2
M15	Manju	23	5	MP	5	Brahmin	2
M16	Bhavya	20	3	Bihar	2	Swami	1
M17	Washundra	37	1	West Bengal	19	Khati	2

Note: Educational attainment: 0=no education (28.3%), 1=primary level (17.5%), 2=middle school (21.7%), 3=high school (17.5%), 4=secondary school (8%), 5=graduate (5.8%), 6=post-graduate (1%).

Appendix B

List of CRMF Fathers Interviewed

Code	Pseudonym	Number of Years Married	Age	Caste	Number of Children
F1	Manoj	9	43	Khati	2
F2	Bharat	1	22	Chamar	0
F3	Jitesh	20	41	Ahir	2
F4	Wasudev	15	65	Ahir	2
F5	Warun	16	42	Ahir	2
F6	Jugal Kishore	12	39	Ahir	2
F7	Umakant	8	35	Ahir	2

Appendix C

List of Government officers Interviewed

Sr. No.	Position	Level	Code	Local/non-local
1	Chief Minister's Good Governance Associate (CMGGA), Mahendragarh	District	CMGGA-D1	non-local
2	Program Manager, National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)	District	PM-D1	Local
3	Block Program Manager, NRLM	Block	BPM-B1	Local
4	District Development and Panchayat Officer (DDPO)	District	DDPO-D1	non-local
5	Block Development and Panchayat Officer (BDPO)	Block	BDPO-B1	non-local
6	Social Education and Panchayat Officer (SEPO)	Block	SEPO-B1	Local
7	Young Professional, NRLM	Block	YP-D1	non-local
8	Deputy Commissioner	District	DC-D1	non-local
9	Assistant Professor, Central University of Haryana	-	AP-1	non-local
10	Block Education Officer (BEO)	Block	BEO-B1	Local
11	District Program Officer (DPO), Women and Child Development department	District	DPO-D1	Local
12	Projects Officer, Rural Development Department	State	PO-S1	non-local
13	Special Cells for Women and Children officer, Women Police Station	District	SCWC-D1	non-local
14	District Child Protection Officer (DCPO), Women and Child Development department	District	DCPO-D1	Local

Appendix D

List of Sarpanches Interviewed

Code	Pseudonym	Educational Attainment	Gender	Caste
S1	Pradeep Kumar	Postgraduate	Male	Ahir
S2	Ramratan	High School	Male	Ahir
S3	Shubhkaran	Postgraduate	Male	Ahir
S4	Arvind	High School	Male	Jat
S5	Ganesh	Graduate	Male	Brahmin
S6	Nirmala	Middle School	Female	Ahir
S7	Radhe Shyam	Graduate	Male	Chamar
S8	Narendra	High School	Male	Ahir
S9	Raju	Middle School	Male	Ahir
S10	Sandeep	High School	Male	Ahir
S11	Urmila	Graduate	Female	Ahir
S12	Kamlesh	High School	Female	Ahir
S13	Babli	Middle School	Female	Ahir
S14	Ramphal	High School	Male	Chamar
S15	Anita	High School	Female	Chamar
S16	Abhishek	High School	Male	Swami
S17	Santosh Devi	Secondary School	Female	Ahir

S18	Kamla Devi	Secondary School	Female	Chamar
S19	Anshi	Graduate	Female	Chamar
S20	Ranjeet	Postgraduate	Male	Saini
S21	Jitendra	High School	Male	Ahir

Appendix E

Pearson's Correlation Results for Age at Marriage between CRMF Mothers and Fathers

Pearson's Correlation

Variable		**Age at Marriage (CRMF mothers)**	**Age at Marriage (CRMF fathers)**
1. Age at Marriage (CRMF mothers)	Pearson's r	—	
	p-value	—	
2. Age at Marriage (CRMF fathers)	Pearson's r	0.490	—
	p-value	< .001	—

Appendix F

One-Way ANOVA Results: Number of Children

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
H_1	Regression	115.082	10	11.508	13.541	< .001
	Residual	413.055	486	0.850		
	Total	528.137	496			

Note. The intercept model is omitted, as no meaningful information can be shown.

One-Way ANOVA Results: Family Size by Employment Status of CRMF mothers

Cases	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Employment Status of CRMF mothers	24.060	5	4.812	4.687	< .001
Residuals	504.077	491	1.027		

Note. Type III Sum of Squares

One-Way ANOVA Results: Family Size by Employment Status of CRMF Fathers

Cases	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Employment Status of CRMF fathers	15.315	7	2.188	2.086	0.044
Residuals	512.822	489	1.049		

Note. Type III Sum of Squares