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Matters of the Heart: Romance, Courtship, and Conjugality in Contemporary Delhi*

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Abstract

This article explores narratives of heterosexual romance and conjugality in Wazirpur, a neighbourhood in north west Delhi, dominated by the steel industry and populated by a largely migrant workforce. Focusing primarily on two generations of women, it considers how the relationship between romantic love and marriage is articulated, performed and imagined. The oral accounts presented here suggest a multidirectional pattern of marital mobility, which is grounded in social conventions of conjugality. Familial tensions and social fault lines appear over marital decisions, crystallizing especially when elopements or ‘court marriages’ take place. The romantic relationships and forms of courtship in Wazirpur have to discursively and spatially negotiate the tensions between social approval and individual choice. While increasingly, a considerable degree of significance is accorded to the emotional bond between the couple, parental support and the public performance of respectability remain central to marital formations. The article suggests that the intimate and the emotional are not only located in the interior of the individual but are forged by intersecting and often competing registers of social regulation.

The thorny relationship between individual choice of a marital partner and the social norms governing marriage has received much attention in public commentaries as well as in popular culture.¹ Studies of the practices and discourses of romance and conjugality offer a crucial lens with which to understand social fault lines, social regulation, and the animation of individual desires against social codes. Recent research has explored various, significant dimensions of romantic love, including literary and filmic repertoires of love, the conflicts and negotiations involved in forming and maintaining intimate relationships, the role of the state in the self-chosen conjugal bond, the place of modernity and the “pure relationship” in the lived practices of South Asian intimacy, to name a few.² However, barring some notable exceptions, this growing body of work has focused largely on the “middle-classes.”³ This paper draws attention to the worlds of Delhi’s working poor through an ethnographic study of one of the city’s industrial neighborhoods, Wazirpur. By focusing on trajectories of romance, courtship, and conjugality, I highlight the complex, contingent, and unstable dynamics of intimate arrangements in workers’ lives.

To be sure, there are a range of intimate relationships that form and grow in the homes and streets of Wazirpur. For this paper, I focus specifically on those centering on conjugal arrangements and heterosexual romantic attachments. This article is not intended to be comprehensive exposition of the intimate worlds of the city’s working classes, but rather an attempt to get a sense of

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the textures of plebian life in a small corner of Delhi. Drawing primarily on oral narratives and life histories, I aim to trace the complexities and ambiguities of migration and life in Delhi, tease out the shifting codes of courtship and romance and offer a way of looking at how individual desires play out against the terms set by socio-cultural forces.

To address these questions it was imperative to go beyond the official archives. Wazirpur, the site of my explorations, has expanded since the early 1970s into a sprawling complex of factories, workshops, and workers' settlements, but has left meager archival traces. Neither the history of the area nor the lives of its residents have a significant presence in the official record. To retrace the history of the neighborhood, follow the patterns of spatial growth and, most importantly for me, to observe the dynamics of intimate lives, we would have to find a different body of records. This paper relies on about four months of ethnographic fieldwork and draws from oral sources in the form of individual biographies, life histories, and group conversations/ interviews. Many of the families that I have interacted with have lived in Wazirpur for several decades—moving to Delhi in the 1980s, settling in the area, building their *jhuggis*, and eventually “buying” them. My interlocutors are mainly women from two generations—mothers and daughters.⁴

When I began my research and made an attempt to collect women's life stories, I was met with a fairly standard response across the neighborhood. Nothing exceptional had happened to them; why would their stories be of any interest?⁵ The narratives in this paper did not emerge from unified, sequential accounts of individual life histories. They came in fragments, constructed and performed for me, the audience. Since most of the interviews and conversations took place in the homes and (sometimes) in the workplaces of my interlocutors, they were often interrupted by the demands of their household or work schedules. Instead of following a chronological sequence, these accounts were nonlinear, oscillating between dramatic events. The possibility exists that these narratives may change in further interviews, as new details are added or new contradictions appear.

Looking at oral narratives in this paper does not bring us closer to the “truth” of working-class lives. Rather, it offers a fresh perspective on otherwise underexplored aspects of everyday lives in industrial Delhi. The use of oral narratives in historical research has provoked much discussion. Instead of debating the authenticity or veracity of oral sources, it is perhaps more productive to view them as multivalent narratives. They are transcripts of events as they may have “really” happened, memories that are framed through formulaic conventions, and socially and culturally rooted narrative genres.⁶ As Portelli has argued, it allows a glimpse into the speaker's subjectivities, illuminating not only people's actions as they unfolded but also revealing the meaning and the desires inscribed in those actions.⁷ It is an exceptionally promising resource with which to explore the landscapes of intimacy, the everyday practices of romance, courtship and conjugality, and the fears, anxieties, and dreams that are embedded in them. This paper attempts to understand how these interior worlds are formed and challenged, how contradictory impulses of desire and

normativity are resolved, and how individual acts of rebellion and defiance interact with forms of social regulation.

The paper is divided into five sections: The first part lays the field of my investigations, highlighting the social and economic context of the neighborhood that I have studied. The second section focuses on rural-urban entanglements, drawing out the diverse experiences of marriage and migration. The third section introduces the tale of a courtship, and the fourth explores the tensions between different registers of intimacy and problematizes the discursive distinction that is often posed between “love marriages” and “arranged marriages.” The final segment of this paper outlines the ways in which the social space of Wazirpur shapes the performance of romance.

Situating the field

Tucked away behind Delhi’s Outer Ring Road, which girds the city, the Wazirpur Industrial Area houses thousands of workshops, factories, and informal settlements. The posh banquet and function halls on the Ring Road camouflage the grim conditions that mark the industrial zone. Wazirpur grew as one of the many designated industrial zones created by the Delhi Master Plan of 1966.⁸ These early attempts at urban planning by the Indian state involved the acquisition of large tracts of agricultural land from the city’s peripheries, which were transformed for urban use. The city was, thus, zoned with spaces designated for industrial, commercial, and residential use. By the late 1960s, the Delhi Development Authority was attempting to relocate industries from the inner core of the city to the outlying designated industrial zones, such as Wazirpur.⁹ These planning measures, which rested, in part, upon directing and managing urban industrial growth and settlements, unsettled older sites of industrial production and built new ones.

Though a designated industrial area, the majority of factories and workshops in Wazirpur operate illegally. The area had been demarcated for the production of what were called “group I” industries, mainly textiles and wood and paper products. However, more than 80 percent of industries in the area produce steel utensils and electronic parts, activities that do not have the requisite clearances.¹⁰ The workshops and factories proliferated, and the industrial workforce in the area now far exceeds, what was accounted for in the plans. The working population—a majority of whom were migrants—settled in the shanties and slums that grew adjacent to the factories. These worker neighborhoods were built on vacant public land, mainly owned by the Railways and the Delhi Development Authority, and as such, its residents were under a perpetual threat of eviction.

At present, Wazirpur is home to an estimated twelve hundred industrial units, employing about fifty thousand workers. Information regarding the exact numbers of industrial units remains vague—no official statistics exist on the either the workshops or of those who work in them.¹¹ Industrial activity in this area is dominated by the steel industry—the hot and cold rolling mills, the

pickling and cleaning units, the cutting and polishing workshops. The steel industry orients the rhythms of both the economic and social life of the neighborhood. For instance, it engenders a range of activities that stem from steel manufacturing—transportation (the cycle carts, in particular, that ferry materials from unit to unit), production of steel cleaning products and packaging material. The cycles of business at the small shops and other local establishments such as money transfer facilities, *dhabas*, and the food stalls, are governed by the rhythms of the steel units, doing brisk business around payday, or the time when the shifts change or on Wednesdays, the weekly day off.

The steel factories similarly shape the sensory character of the locality. The steady noise of the workshops, the clang of the metal sheets as they are worked upon, the buzz of transport trucks loading and unloading goods, and the loud music that workers often play contribute greatly to the aural experience of living in the neighborhood. In fact, when work dwindled following demonetization¹² in November 2016, the most common refrain I heard (apart from the fact that factories were closing down) was about how quiet Wazirpur had become. The pollution and environmental degradation that mark the everyday lives of the area's residents—their health problems, the contaminated water supply, and so on—is in large part a product of the steel industries. The sanitation and sewage systems, which were unable to cope with the excessive industrial development in the area, disgorged much of the polluting waste around the nearby residential areas. With soil and groundwater contaminated, this already insecure habitat was subject to additional risks to health and hygiene. Pollution and the controls against it pose a dual threat to workers/residents in the area. On the one hand, there are considerable bodily risks that surface due to the negligent enforcement of environmental controls. On the other, the periodic attention that these industrial units receive from the Delhi Pollution Control Committee spells possible factory closures and the loss of jobs.

Walking through Wazirpur, one notices how enmeshed the spaces of work and those of the home are. Architecturally, there is hardly any separation—workers' homes are built around the workshops, sometimes, even in the same buildings. A large number of men in the area labor in the steel factories, the hot and cold rolling mills, the ancillary industries of polishing or acid work, while some women work in steel pressing, producing utensils, and others work in cleaning and packing steel products. Many work in the smaller hosiery industry in the area, in transport, as domestic workers, or own small businesses.

Thus far my fieldwork has been concentrated in Block A, a small part of this sprawling industrial complex. Block A is a warren of narrow streets, overrun with exposed cables, flanked by overflowing drains. Two bigger roads—lined with factories, small shops, and workers' houses—bracket the neighborhood. The interior of this neighborhood and its incredibly dense concentration of houses remain permanently in the shadows, with barely any space in which to maneuver. These inner lanes, where the houses are flimsy and fragile, stacked precariously upon one another, look as though they are continuously under construction. The houses appear unfinished, like they are being

constantly built and re-built. The outer parts of the block, while relatively less congested, nevertheless, appear similarly unstable. The buildings, painted blue, green, and pink, are huddled together and the upper floors are accessible only through rickety ladders or very narrow staircases. The population in this part of Wazirpur is largely from the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. A vast majority belongs to the lower castes and to the minority Muslim community.¹³

The settlement of Wazirpur has left very few documentary traces because the process of building and acquiring homes was done primarily through informal means. When working-class residents moved into this area in the 1980s, attracted by the jobs in the nearby factories and the cheaper rents, this part of Wazirpur was still a “jungle.” Mayadevi¹⁴ recalls when she and her husband first moved into the neighborhood in the late 1980s:

It was a sea of tarpaulin, plastic sheets and straw mats... after about three years, more houses were built ... low brick structures, topped with a mat ... earlier, the area was full of ditches, flies and insects...the factory owners didn't build any houses for us ... the pradhans (local community leaders) of the area rented out the land to the factory workers ... we built these houses brick by brick ... we collected bricks and other material from the factory compounds, we would lay out plastic sheets, fill the deep ditches with earth... and a person couldn't even walk on these lanes, it was all mud and water...

Marital mobility in Wazirpur

Mayadevi's trajectory echoes that of several older women in the neighborhood, many of whom followed their husbands who moved to Delhi in search of work.¹⁵ These patterns of migration were neither unilinear nor stable. The workers in Wazirpur maintained strong ties to their villages, moving back for long periods of time and shifting between industries and locations across the Delhi metropolitan region. The move from the village to the city cannot be seen as simple transition from tradition to modernity or from oppression to freedom. Rather, these oral narratives from Wazirpur point to often contradictory experiences of migration. The following excerpts from life histories illustrate some of the hopes and anxieties linked to migration and marriage.

Mayadevi, the daughter of landless agricultural workers in Bihar, was married at the age of fourteen to twenty-year-old Raghur. According to customary practice, there is a lag between the ritual marriage and the *gauna*, which is when the woman relocates to her marital home and marks the start of conjugal relations. Thus, Mayadevi remained at her natal home while her newly-wed husband moved to Delhi to do what, she did not know at that time; all she knew was that he had moved to the city to “earn money.” This was in September 1984. When Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated on October 31, 1984, Delhi witnessed widespread violence, primarily against the Sikh community. Meanwhile in Bihar, with no word from Raghur, Mayadevi and her in-laws were growing anxious. A part of the blame for this

unfortunate coincidence, the riots erupting soon after Raghbir moved to Delhi, was placed on Mayadevi. Perhaps she was the unlucky influence, it was implied. After two months, they finally received a postcard from him; at the bottom, was one line asking his brother to check on his bride. When Raghbir returned to the village, Mayadevi moved to her marital home. Within a few months Raghbir set off for Delhi again; this time, Mayadevi knew that he was going to work at a hosiery factory in Wazirpur. She spent an unhappy two years with her in-laws. Much of the domestic tension was centered on the fact that two years had passed since her marriage and she had not yet fallen pregnant. When speaking of the longing and anxiety that Mayadevi felt when her husband was away in Delhi, she falls back on tropes that have historically found expression in folk songs and ballads. She did conceive soon after and when her eldest daughter was a year old she followed her husband to Delhi.

The difficulties of adjusting to the marital home, the quotidian conflicts with the in-laws, and the anxieties of conjugal separation were motifs that resonate in other narratives. Zulekha—similarly married before attaining puberty, to a man that she later realized was a *sharaabi*, a “drunk”—spent years at her in-laws’ village in Bihar before moving to Delhi. Her *gauna*, she recalled, happened soon after Indira Gandhi’s assassination. Like Mayadevi, Zulekha relied on a major historical event around which to weave her own personal story:

it was around chhat puja ... six ... no, nine days after Diwali ... my date [*gauna*] was then ... And then, there was so much commotion, word that curfew had been imposed. You know, radios? People were carrying radios and we heard on the news ... that in Delhi, Indira Gandhi has been killed, curfew has been imposed and we got to know that my uncle had been knifed ... and anyone could get hurt ... those with beards, for sure ... but really, anyone could be attacked ...

Zulekha’s husband was already in Delhi with his father when Indira Gandhi was assassinated in October 1984, and in the midst of these troubles, her grandfather-in-law escorted her to her marital home.

The unhappiness and irritation that has marked most of her married life began early on. While she waited for her husband to return from Delhi, tensions soon surfaced with her mother-in-law over the division of household labor: the rhythms of cooking in the common kitchen, the daily routines of fetching water from the neighborhood well, and the agricultural work that she had to undertake. Zulekha recalled the early years of her marriage with bitterness:

they didn’t have a hand pump and I was supposed to draw water from the well ... she [the mother-in-law] expected me to go at three, four in the morning ... who will go then? I didn’t even know the place ... why would I go out in the dark? And when I went to do all this work in the morning, she would say, oh, there you go showing yourself again!

After a few years of domestic tension, Zulekha came to Delhi to join her husband. Life in Delhi, too, she said, was “useless.” Nothing much changed. She would wait for him to return home to their jhuggi in Budh Vihar, Rohini, and he would, as she remarked, “come home drunk and leave home, drunk.” She bore all the “tension” of life in the city, the everyday stresses of maintaining a house, providing for their children: “the whole day, my mind would be whirling ... and what would happen when there is tension all the time? ... I will fall sick, my BP will go low ... that’s what.”

While the move to Delhi had removed her from the direct control of her in-laws, urban living introduced a new set of anxieties. For many of the older women from Wazirpur, their first impressions of Delhi were far from pleasant. Mayadevi recounted her first encounter with the city:

It was my first experience of living in a jhuggi ... I was nearly eaten alive by mosquitoes ... we first lived in Shalimar¹⁶ where my cousin lived. He got us a room on rent. There were no toilets there; we had to go on the “road” ... I mean, near the railway tracks ... I hated it, I found it so difficult ... I really didn’t want to stay on here and I kept complaining ... but my sister in law was there, and she kept me company and I ended up staying.

While Delhi afforded her a certain degree of freedom, she nevertheless found life in the city demeaning. The lack of privacy, the crowded settlements, the routine struggles over water and sanitation disturbed her. Both Mayadevi and Zulekha entered the labor market after their move to Delhi as informal workers in the ancillary steel industries. In this, they confirm to broader South Asian trends of labor force participation in which women tend to enter the labor market after marriage and childbirth and remain more heavily concentrated in informal employment.¹⁷ Unlike in the case of domestic workers presented by Sen and Sengupta, marriage did not present an interruption or a hiatus in their work lives.¹⁸ Rather, it was the particular mobility that was tied to marriage and the pressures that accompanied urban living that prompted their workforce participation.¹⁹

In contemporary Wazirpur, the ties between the city and the village endure and are fortified through marital connections. For most families, the search for eligible partners for their children is conducted through a wide network of kin and caste fellows and is, to a great extent, directed at the mother’s natal village.²⁰ While marriage-based mobility is inherently gendered in patrilocal contexts, this has specific implications for marital alliances in Wazirpur. As Vatuk, in an earlier study of migration and kinship in urban North India, and Grover, more recently, in her monograph on marital relations in low income neighborhoods of Delhi, observe, for those marriages forged in geographical proximity, the spatial, affective, and institutional distinctions between the natal and the conjugal spheres are gradually blurring.²¹ However, in my (admittedly small) field of research, we see that aside from “love marriages,” there is a strong preference for seeking eligible partners from within their rural caste and community

networks. Partly, the reasoning for this can be found in what Osella terms “economic-pragmatic” considerations.²² The most eligible grooms would be those in government jobs or those who own (or have claims to) property. Insofar as Wazirpur is concerned, at this point, the most eligible matches for young women are in the villages.²³ The most suitable brides—and here, my observations echo those of Grover’s—are young women from the village, for they are considered to be more docile and subservient than a “Delhi girl.”²⁴ Thus, in Wazirpur, we find young women from the area often moving to their husband’s rural homes and those from the villages moving to Delhi after marriage.

Considerations of reputation and social and economic status structure marital negotiations, as a move to Delhi is often presented by the boy’s family as a marker of upward mobility. For new brides in Wazirpur, the promise of the life offered in Delhi, remain at odds with the actual experience of migration. For instance, Renuka’s marriage and her initial shock of encountering Wazirpur has become a subject of much mirth in the neighborhood and is routinely retold as “joke.” When Renuka came to Wazirpur in the early 2000s after her marriage, she walked straight towards the sole concrete structure in the neighborhood. Her confusion was entirely understandable, her friends tell me; she had been told that her husband’s family lived in a three storied house in Delhi. Her ensuing despair, too, was familiar, for many of the women in Wazirpur had sent equally distraught missives to their families, alternately blaming and appealing to them. Like Mayadevi, Renuka continued to stay with her husband’s family in Wazirpur. In these cases, conjugal stability coalesced with residential stability, as both women, initially dissatisfied with life in Delhi, in the end, remained in the city.

For many others, however, both forms of stability have been more ambiguous. Women and men, across generations in Wazirpur have formed intimate attachments other than that of their primary marriage, “de-coupled” and periodically “re-coupled.” Similarly, the currents of migration have not solely been uni-directional. The mobility that was made possible for Mayadevi, Zulekha, and others—through marriage and then subsequent relocation to Delhi—is now being reversed in the case of their daughters. The return to the village for Wazirpur’s second generation of women is fraught with tension and for many young women, the move to the village not only enforces new codes of public behavior and social respectability but also ruptures women’s access to education and participation in the urban labor market. Take, for instance, the case of Aarti, who was married to a painting contractor from Bihar at the age of seventeen when she was studying in Class 11. Her mother, who has since passed away, used to run a small stall selling samosas and kachoris, vegetables and sundry daily essentials, and her father, after working in a hosiery factory in Wazirpur, drives a tourist taxi. Aarti had been suggesting that this was a marriage that she had not consented to, and she was apparently having some difficulty in adjusting to it. Her behavior in her husband’s home in Hajipur, her manner of speaking, her way of dealing with the extended family, was far more guarded than it was in Delhi. She had dropped out of school, having decided that

all future formal education would no longer be useful for her. She returned from her husband's home after about a month and stayed in Delhi for several months. After her mother's death in April 2017, Aarti was made to reluctantly return to her husband's home. While for Aarti, her marital home, specifically, and the village, more generally, represents a space of restriction and regulation; a very different narrative emerges from Feriha's story.

The "love story"

During my conversations with Feriha, she often asked if I had finished writing her "love story." She would then gleefully declare that "I could write a whole book on it ... or maybe, it could even be made into a film!" underscoring the intensity and emotional weight that she assigns to this relationship. Twenty-one-year-old Feriha is a Masters student in Political Science, one of the rare young women from the area to graduate. She teaches extra classes, part-time, for some of the neighborhood school children, earning some money of her own. Her mother, Zulekha (whose interviews we have referred to earlier in this paper), now works at a steel utensils packing factory in Wazirpur, and her largely absent and occasionally violent father (who has recently passed away) worked for a fruit ripening company. He used to drive an auto rickshaw, but the vehicle was repossessed when he failed to pay off his debts. Feriha is the first of seven children to graduate from college; her elder siblings having left school at a young age. Over the years, Feriha and her sisters have combined their schooling with paid domestic work.²⁵ A few years ago, on trip to her maternal grandparents' home in Bihar, Feriha met and fell in love with Emir. They are both Muslims from different castes. Their love story, mainly conducted over WhatsApp, has endured much parental opposition.

That trip, her first solo trip, was in her words a "transformative experience." For Feriha, the village appears as a space of freedom. The village is a bucolic romantic ideal, which allowed her the possibility of forging a consensual romantic bond. The details of her courtship have emerged over several conversations and the bare bones story fleshed out in sparkling detail in every retelling. In the winter of 2013–14, Feriha exchanged glances with Emir soon after arriving in Motihari, her mother's natal village. Her uncle, who received her at the railway station, dropped her at a P.G.²⁶ where some of his friends were staying, while he ran some errands.

I wasn't even looking and I walked straight in ... when I saw the boy who was sitting in bed and studying, I just went still ... my feet just stopped ... I said salaam, and he ... he was so shy, he was blushing ... he never even replied to my greeting. My uncle told him to give me lunch while he went and submitted some forms ... but Emir, he couldn't even manage that...he was so shy ... So, I just prepared my own lunch ... it was so cold and the sun was streaming in through the window ... I lay down on the bed and fell into a deep sleep ... but I remember, I didn't wrap myself with the blanket because I thought it would not

be “sensible” ... After my uncle returned, we left for my grandmother’s house ... And all these boys from the P.G. were gathered outside, Emir was also there ... and these boys said to him, “Let’s see if you can woo that girl!” ... Imagine! I told Emir later, if I had known this, I would have never ever spoken to you ... I hate such boys ... seriously! Emir also accepted this challenge and he told them, “wait...she’s going to turn back to look at me,” but I didn’t ... why would I? I wouldn’t engage with these strangers. And then his friends mocked him, saying ‘She didn’t even look back, like hell you will “propose” to her.

The courtship was carried out over a period of two weeks, when Emir would loiter in Feriha’s vicinity, playing badminton, smoking cigarettes, driving a motorbike. Intermediaries were mobilized by both parties to make inquiries and phone numbers were exchanged. The mobile phone quite early on was the primary instrument of flirtation. Clandestine phone calls were made, messages of friendship were exchanged, and plans were made to meet. Feriha’s cell phone presented both the promise of romance and the anxieties of social shame. Being the only one with a cell phone in her grandmother’s house, her phone was very attractive to her aunts and cousins, and she had to resolutely guard it. The proposal came on New Year’s Eve, in a field behind her grandmother’s house, where Emir got down on one knee and serenaded her with a popular Bollywood love song. The relationship was “formalized” for the both of them—shifting from “friendship” to coupledness—at this point, with declarations of love articulated in English, exchanges of greeting cards, and a rose.²⁷ The material artefacts of this courtship (the card and now the dried rose) were handed over to friends for safekeeping.

The romance was staged (or at least, retold) cinematically. Woven into the story she told me was another more formulaic one. Her personal account of desire and longing was punctuated by an emphasis on the social codes of respectability, while another intertwined narrative told the story of star crossed lovers, of a wager made over her wooing, whispered entreaties for her to turn back, of secret meetings in moonlit fields, of love winning over parental opposition—relying on motifs that are heavy with the symbolism of Bollywood romances. The village, in her braided narrative, is the fertile ground where her romance blossomed, much like in the Bollywood movies of late 1990s, where the (sanitized) social worlds of rural India appear as both the glue for and the backdrop to epic romances.²⁸ In subsequent trips, her attachment to her mother’s natal village (and what might possibly become her own marital village) has grown. In her fantasies about her life after marriage, it is always in Motihari that she sees herself and Emir living.

Love and marriage

It is a fantasy that is infused with fear, for the central factor in realizing this dream—her marriage to Emir—hangs in the balance. What if she is not allowed to marry him? Their early courtship had not remained a secret, and

rumors circulated about their relationship. The talk surrounding Feriha's relationship made its way to Delhi through relatives and acquaintances that moved between the two places. It formed a way of connecting the social worlds of Wazirpur and that of the village. Emir's family, according to Feriha, had accepted their relationship and was ready with a marriage proposal. Feriha's mother, Zulekha, on the other hand, despite (or maybe because of) old associations with Emir's family, refused to consent to their marriage. The reasons offered for this are multiple. One possibility is that the marriage would be an inter-caste one. Another is that she had been influenced by gossip in the village that painted Emir as a "flirt," and therefore unsuitable for marriage. Yet another is that the mother was against love itself. Feriha tells me that she is determined to marry Emir, and has employed various stratagems to convince her mother.

While in Feriha's mind, her relationship is "pure" and deserves the respect and social acceptance accorded to a "true love," there are mechanisms that would necessarily have to be employed in order to reinforce its "righteousness." The most important appears to be managing the social perception of the relationship and minimizing its transgressive potential. In Feriha's narrative, and in the discourses of marriage in the neighborhood, a distinction is made between "love marriages" and "arranged marriages." While this division remains crucial at an ideological level, in practice it is porous.²⁹ The opposition between love and marriage has been quite durable historically, with conventional views in Northern India regarding marriage more in terms of duty and reproduction rather than that of the emotional bond between the couple.³⁰ Deeper conjugal intimacy is posed as a threat to the integrity of the joint family.³¹ Nevertheless, Uberoi shows that the tension between love marriages and arranged marriages has been resolved with two conjugal configurations: the "love cum arranged marriage" and the "arranged cum love marriage."³² In the first, the romantic couple is granted social approval with a parentally organized wedding, and the second refers to the romantic love that grows after marriage.

For Feriha, a legally registered marriage would not be legitimate unless it was buttressed by the weight of social approval.³³ This is why she has so far resisted what seems to her to be a thing of great shame—a court marriage. A civil marriage or a registered marriage under the Special Marriages Act of 1954 is colloquially known as a "court marriage" and is viewed with some degree of mistrust.³⁴ While Emir has been attempting to persuade her to choose the legal route to sanctify their union, she has mounted an untiring struggle to sway her mother.³⁵

The uneasy relationship between a civil or a "court" marriage and a "social" marriage is visible in a variety of sources. They are discernable in conversations about romantic relationships and their denouement as well as in judicial discussions of intimacy. In this paper, I limit my analysis to oral narratives from Wazirpur, but it is nevertheless, worth highlighting the competing registers of intimacy that emerge in the "kidnapping"/"abduction" cases that have been filed in the area.³⁶ In such cases, the shame of an elopement, the validity of court

marriages, and the legitimacy of a (previous or contemporaneous) “social” union, are addressed through legal means and negotiated in court. The social legitimacy accorded to a marriage formalized only legally remains incomplete. The partial social acceptance of a court marriage appears to center on two anxieties. First, a civil marriage (especially one that is preceded by an elopement) implies the intrusion of the state into private affairs. Second, as Mody also highlights, a “proper” marriage must be a public event and be accorded social sanction by the community.³⁷

The Indian state has historically attempted to intervene in the family. Apart from the various government schemes centered on the low income household, the period of the National Emergency (1975–1977) witnessed a short lived but violent attempt to regulate reproduction in the working class family.³⁸ In present day Wazirpur, the state with its agencies and its functionaries are pervasive. They regulate employment benefits, legal entitlements of workers, the disbursement of social welfare schemes, civic services and issue regular threats of factory closures, demolition and eviction. However, very few (arranged) marriages in Wazirpur are solemnized by the state.³⁹ Often, women marry very young (before they finish high school) in social and religious ceremonies. A registered (court) marriage, in such cases, would only be necessary if the marriage was inter-religious or if the couple was marrying against the wishes of their families.

Elopements are not rare in Wazirpur. Every such event generates its own lore and enters into collective memory, resurfacing occasionally as cautionary tale and social precedent. Such scandals (for they are initially seen as such in the neighborhood) offer a prism through which to view the conflicts and negotiations over conjugal relations. In these incidents, or rather in the conversations, discussions, and gossip around them, gradations of public, social, and private behavior appear.

In all my conversations with Mayadevi regarding her children, which ranged over many aspects of her children’s marriages, she never mentioned that one of her daughters had a “love marriage.” This, I gathered from my conversations with the rest of her family, her younger daughters in particular, and from other residents of the area. Like many of her contemporaries, one of Mayadevi’s most pressing preoccupations revolves around the marriage of her two youngest daughters, both of whom are still underage. Her two older daughters, she told me, are married into “good homes” and similar matches would be highly desirable for her younger ones. While her silence around her elder daughter’s marriage of choice could, perhaps, signal a desire to keep the transgressions secret or indicate a willful misremembering or simply a wish to not reveal this information to me, Mayadevi’s younger daughter, Roopa recalls the incident with almost gleeful exuberance:

Rekha didi must have been in 10th grade when she eloped...in fact, my jijaji⁴⁰ had approached my mother to ask for Rekha’s hand in marriage ... but Mummy said she was still too young ... Jijaji must have thought that they would get her married to someone else ... so within a few days, a group of her friends came home to fetch

her for a birthday party, and my mother allowed her to go ... then, my sister telephoned to say that she had gotten married. Later my sister told me—“What could I do? When I reached the ‘birthday party’ I realized that he [her boyfriend] had arranged for a ‘temple marriage’⁴¹ to take place ... I had no choice, either could I die or I could get married to him.”

Roopa remembered her mother yelling into the telephone, telling her sister to come back home and without any of the trappings of a married woman—“I was young but I remember this, she was shouting at didi and saying come back exactly as you left home, no sindoor, nothing ... ” Rekha came home the next day, Roopa emphasized, “the very next ... not a few days later,” and in defiance of her mother’s instructions, dressed like a bride.

She came in a car, accompanied by her in laws...and she came and sat inside ... and all the neighbors were coming by, peeking in to see what was going on ... and my mother ... she was just sitting with her head in her hands ... Jijaji had brought sweets for our family ... and a box of rasgullas that he said was for me, his younger sister in law ... I really wanted to eat them and all my friends were egging me on to open the box...Feriha kept saying, “open it ... let’s eat the rasgullas ... he got them for you” ... but I was too scared that mummy would hit me if I did.

Declaring Rekha’s love marriage to be a “success,” her sister points out that despite the “drama” that unfolded over her elopement, Rekha was accepted back into the parental fold. Partly, she suggests that this was because Rekha’s husband was of the same caste and from her *naami*’s village, and therefore the marriage, while undermining parental authority, had not transgressed caste or community boundaries. He was educated and at that time, had good prospects for employment. Secondly, though the marriage had been conducted in secret, the public spectacle of the event was relatively short. In other words, it was not a long drawn out process involving an extended elopement, police investigations, and a court marriage. Rekha had returned to her natal home soon after her marriage, and her new husband had attempted to soothe tensions and consolidate the affinal relationship by exchanging gifts. As Roopa announced, “If any of us have a court marriage, we would not be allowed to step foot in this house again.” Of crucial significance here is the performative aspects of respectability. The loss of social honor that stems from an elopement is gradually repaired through public displays of family approval.

A few years later, a similar incident occurred in Feriha’s family. Her seventeen-year-old sister, Ayesha, began a secret relationship with a young man from Wazirpur. The man was also Muslim from the same caste but from a different region. The social distance was wider than in Rekha’s case. Faced with her parents’ obdurate opposition to this relationship, Ayesha eloped with her boyfriend. This incident not only caused a public scandal in the area but also brought the police and the Juvenile Courts into their home. When the two

lovers were found and Feriha's father brought Ayesha home from police custody, a fair bit of domestic violence followed. Soon after, she left home again, lived with her boyfriend until she came of age, and has since severed ties with her family. The estrangement has been an extremely public one. Ayesha presently lives in a neighboring *jhuggi* and it is common knowledge that her relationship with her family is strained. Yet, there are small private concessions. On Eid, for instance, Zulekha would send over some food to her daughter's house, or Feriha or her sister might chat with her in the street.

This incident seems to have had a deep impact on Feriha and colored her notions of social and personal shame. The public embarrassment of the elopement, the humiliation that she felt her father endure at the police station, the local gossip that circulated about her family merge to shape her public comportment. Underlying this is a more interior sense of shame—the fact that she was also complicit in the violence against her sister. Thus, for Feriha who is herself at the cusp of disrupting familial and social norms, this incident offers both a sense of possibility and a cautionary tale.⁴²

While the workers' settlements of Wazirpur have not witnessed “honor killings,”⁴³ caste and community norms are nevertheless maintained through customary forms of marital alliances and proscriptions on those who breach them. The need to maintain caste hierarchies and by association parental and community authority remains (at least publicly) significant, though considerable latitude may be allowed in the practices of conjugality. While the obsession with female (especially unmarried women's) chastity may be less pronounced than in the middle classes as other scholars have demonstrated, there is nevertheless considerable investment in Wazirpur in managing social reputations.⁴⁴ According to many of the younger women, romantic relationships have flourished in Wazirpur, and “one could find a ‘love marriage’ in every *galli*.” Yet, almost simultaneously, other statements are made suggesting heavy social regulation. For instance, “even if our parents accept, ‘samaj’ wouldn't ... they won't stop talking, they won't let you live ... they will kill you while you are still alive ... and who wants their parents to be shunned?”⁴⁵ These contradictions between public posturing and the pragmatics of conjugality are critical, pointing to the ways in which dominant codes are enforced and contested. The social legitimacy of a marriage remains unstable, premised as it is, on a range of contingent factors. In a recent piece, Dhawan demonstrates how class differences are articulated over the legal definition of marriage, with middle-class women placing great weight on the legal legitimacy of a marriage while for working-class women, the legal sanctification of marriage was unimportant.⁴⁶

The significance of the “social” sanctification of marriage in Wazirpur appears in the simmering tensions over Aarti's wedding. Her hurried marriage, she told me, had been prompted by the circulation of a series of rumors regarding a supposed abortion. She implied that some neighbors and her uncle, who works in a steel factory in the area, wrote a letter to the *kumhar*⁴⁷ caste panchayat in her village in Bihar detailing her alleged transgressions. As a result, there was considerable difficulty in finding an eligible groom and when that

had been settled, in having a socially acceptable wedding. Even though she had a social ceremony and not just a court marriage, the fact that many of her caste elders boycotted the wedding tinged the event with a considerable bit of dissatisfaction. Since she has returned to her natal home in Delhi, she has had to face taunts and jibes about whether she has even had a socially sanctified wedding at all. Her anxiety over “what people say” was not limited to the event of the wedding but extends also to the more public displays of conjugality. Her return to Delhi, unaccompanied by her husband, prompted another series of rumors in the neighborhood. She insisted that she would only return to her marital home when her husband comes to escort her back. Whether this is factually valid is not of great significance. Rather, the telling of this story is important as an account of the desires, disappointments, and fears that surround intimate relationships in the area. The social legitimacy of the conjugal union is, thus, predicated upon a range of practices that center around the “arrangement” of the marriage, the event of the wedding, and married life.

The possibilities afforded by and the embarrassments associated with the involvement of the state agencies in intimate life are reflected similarly in some of my conversations with Aarti, her mother, and her relatives. Aarti contends that she was underage when she got married and it was under immense social pressure that she agreed to it. In one of the more tense moments that I observed between mother and daughter, Aarti’s mother sharply told her to be grateful for good fortune at having found an eligible husband, and that even if she had gone to the police to allege a child marriage, it would have come to no avail. At a later time, Aarti told me that her parents’ hurry to formalize her marriage stemmed not merely from the rumors that were circulating about her alleged abortion, but also from an inter-caste relationship that she was involved in. Her boyfriend, who belonged to a lower caste, was a neighbor and worked in one of the steel factories. As she was faced with both physical violence and social pressure to acquiesce to her “arranged marriage,” she had indeed considered two possible legal recourses. One, was to employ the law to forestall the unwanted marital negotiations; the other, was to elope and formalize her relationship with her boyfriend through a court marriage.⁴⁸ She eventually followed neither of the two possible legal paths and has, since her marriage, continued the clandestine relationship with her boyfriend. As it happens, this, too, was discovered by her mother. The threat of a court marriage was brandished again—as a possible escape, as an enabler of individual agency. Disregarding the fact that she was already socially married, Aarti gathered two possible witnesses who would attest to her civil marriage. As far as I am aware, she has not yet followed through with this possibility. Between the moral pressure exerted by her family and the admittedly daunting act of elopement, Aarti’s view of her extramarital relationship shifts somewhat unevenly between two narrative poles. At times, she appears prepared to end her marriage and pursue a legally legitimized relationship with her boyfriend. More frequently, however, dissolving her marriage or eloping with her boyfriend does not seem to appear as a viable possibility to her. These would be very public acts that

could invite social censure or shame for the family. The social security and respectability for her and her family that is linked to her marital status is too precious to disturb, at this point. Her inter-caste romance, she says, would never translate into marriage; instead, she vowed to truly love him till death and expected him to reciprocate this love even if he married someone else.

The idiom of “true love” is deployed to stress the legitimacy of their relationships. As Perveen Mody argues in her study of love marriage in Delhi, couples in socially transgressive relationships, while radically defining the parameters of “Indian” morality and marriage, do so not so much by explicit rebellion but rather by rearticulating their romantic bond in terms that are socially acceptable. The moral opprobrium associated with love marriage is countered as these couples see their actions, not so much as breaking tradition but rather transcending it.⁴⁹ For young women from Wazirpur, “true love” offers a way of resolving the contradictions between individual desire and social strictures. For Aarti, it allows a willful disobedience of social codes of behavior. For Feriha, “true love” lends a more powerful charge to her struggle to marry a person of her choosing.

While there is great ambivalence when it comes to everyday conjugal practices, there appears to be an increasing ideological stress on emotional and physical compatibility, among the young women of Wazirpur.⁵⁰ Ideas of romantic love govern, at the very least, the fantasies of conjugality. The significance of popular repertoires of romance and courtship in orienting the local discourses, practices, and fantasies of marriage and married life must be emphasized.⁵¹ For instance, on being asked to choose a pseudonym for this research, Feriha settled upon the names of the protagonists of a dubbed Turkish TV drama that was wildly popular across South Asian metropolises. In the same neighborhood, Aarti would write out in her diary entire scenarios based on two Hindi TV shows, *Love by Chance* and *Yeh hai aashiqui*. The desire to marry one’s boyfriend, the hope that he will be handsome, and that their relationship will be passionately romantic, surface repeatedly in conversations with younger women. The issue of romantic love as the basis for conjugal life is a delicate one in Wazirpur. There are many like Aarti who state that they do not “love” their husbands, but the fantasy remains that romance will blossom within the conjugal relation. This desire is not conceptualized in terms of the indissolubility of the “*jodi*,” or pairing, as Kakar contends, but more in terms of sexual chemistry that is hoped will develop between the couple.⁵² While Aarti has “adjusted”⁵³ to her marriage and harbors some hope that eventually sexual attraction will materialize, she also appears quite content to keep the realm of romantic love separate from the domain of conjugality. Indeed, romantic love is accorded its powerful emotive charge precisely because it lies outside of the acceptable social practice. In contrast to Feriha, for whom premarital intimacy is then expected to be transformed into a socially recognized conjugal union, Aarti’s amorous encounters destabilize the dominant codes of female sexuality in Wazirpur.

Many of the older women took the trouble to convince me that theirs were not “love marriages.” This tendency to strip the conjugal bond of any romantic

charge is not unusual. As other scholars have observed, the polarization between “marriage” and “love” has much to do with the social conventions surrounding conjugal arrangements.⁵⁴ Mayadevi’s marriage for instance did not necessarily follow the conventions of many arranged marriages of her social milieu. Her husband, Raghbir, first saw her when he was visiting relatives in her natal village. For long hours he would loiter around her house, drinking country liquor accompanied by his cousins who happened to be distantly related to her sisters-in-law. In her retelling of this moment, she remembers feeling distinctly curious about this attention and approaching her sister for clues. Unknown to her, within a few days of first seeing her, this young man, Raghbir, marshaled his contacts and made tentative inquiries regarding marriage. The cousin, who was the key contact between the two sides, was sent back with a missive. The girl, Mayadevi, was too young and even if she was ready for marriage, the family did not have the resources to pay the dowry required to formalize the union. Raghbir was undeterred. He continued pursuing her, refused other marriage proposals, and was adamant that a “free” marriage (without an accompanying financial transaction) was what he wanted. In two months, a formal marriage proposal arrived at Mayadevi’s house and the two were married within fifteen days. She is quick to assert that her own marriage was not born out of personal choice and individual desire but rather through an adherence to social custom.

In contrast to this narrative of conjugal relations as being removed from romantic attachments, the younger women tell a different story. Not only are romance and ‘true love’ accorded a special place in their own lives, their parents’ marriages too are retrospectively being fitted into a narrative of romantic love. For instance, Aarti’s mother, who recently passed away, told me that her marriage had been arranged at a young age. She would speak of the domestic drudgeries, the hardships of married life and the routine violence that she would have to deal with. After her mother’s death, I was told a different version by her younger daughter. Here, her parents had had a “love marriage” complete with all accompanying tropes—a childhood friendship that blossomed into love, a courtship that grew out of neighborly conviviality, and marital negotiations that were conducted by the couple themselves.

These conversations attest to the centrality of romantic love in the imagination of marriage and simultaneously draw our attention to the shifts in the generational representations of intimacy and conjugality. In Wazirpur, while ideals of romantic love permeate discussions of intimacy, they sit uneasily with acceptable marital unions. Romantic love thus lies, in some cases, not at the center of the conjugal relationship but as its other, while elsewhere it negotiates with and is then eventually folded into acceptable conjugality.

The neighborhood and the city:

In order to understand the ways in which the romantic relationships of the young women in Wazirpur play out, it is important to understand the spatial

arrangement of the neighborhood. As in many such areas, the separation between the private and the public is not stark. The home seeps onto the street and the distinction between the two is fluid and shifting. This separation, too, is governed to a large extent by the rhythms of work. On most days, the benches and *charpays* on the street are occupied by women—some, having returned from work as domestic help; others, going about their household chores. On Wednesdays (the weekly day off in the industrial area), these spaces, otherwise occupied by women most afternoons, are full of men chatting or playing cards. In many conversations with women, the street in general was seen as somewhat unsavory. It was to be used as a thoroughfare, not a space for socializing. For many of the younger women in the area, chatting at the street corner, loitering, or playing are potentially contentious activities, which could lead to family tensions.⁵⁵ Wednesdays also are seen as the day when younger women, in particular, have to be more careful. Social honor, so easily invested in the bodies and behavior of women, seems to require stricter defense during holidays.

The comings and goings of workers pattern the rhythms of everyday life in the area. Workers on their break sit outside the factories to drink tea and smoke a cigarette. The spatial layout of Wazirpur ensures that there is a steady traffic of neighbors throughout the day as they move between work and home. Feriha's mother, for instance, comes home at every break in her place of work. This constant circulation of one's family and acquaintances, the clustered houses, the spatial proximity of neighbors guarantees that very little space is left unsupervised.

The romances in Wazirpur require a great deal of subterfuge. The strategies these young people employ point to the transforming technologies of courtship as well as the stratified access to urban social space. For Feriha, whose boyfriend Emir lives in Hyderabad, the smartphone and WhatsApp are crucial tools for forging a romantic relationship. While the figure of the emissary and the support networks of friends remain important, far greater contact between the couple is possible with the smartphone. The virtual space affords more freedoms but is carefully monitored. While status updates and profile pictures emerge as particularly charged indices of romantic love, fidelity, and intentions, they are diligently and prudently deployed. For example, after a spat with her boyfriend, Feriha changed her WhatsApp profile photo to one of Emir's as a show of commitment to him, but only after having blocked all her contacts from Wazirpur and her mother's village. In other instances, she posts dialogues from TV shows and movies to convey affection or irritation with her boyfriend. Furthermore, the smartphone or, for that matter, her WhatsApp is hardly private. As a consequence, all intimate messages have to be regularly deleted. With only one smartphone in the family, it is used by all her siblings; innovative ways have to be found to escape the scrutiny of her family.⁵⁶

Emir is from a slightly more affluent family and lives in a boys paying guest accommodation while studying in Hyderabad. Without much domestic responsibility, he has more time to devote to the more ritualistic dimensions of their

romance. For example, he wants to speak on the phone every night, and barring that, an extended WhatsApp chat session. For Feriha, whose daily schedule of college and housework is grueling, this often seems like a chore. Her occasional non-availability or her difficulty in arranging an intimate conversation has often proved to be a source of tension between them, and she has to resort to a range of strategies to balance his demands and the suspicions of her family. She slices out time from her daily routine and calls him in the short window of free time that she has between returning from college and when her mother returns from work. She messages him on her bus rides to college and sneaks away on very rare occasions to her family's half constructed terrace to make a short, potentially dangerous late night call. Nevertheless, tensions persist over the time she devotes to their relationship. He does not, she tells me, understand the demands on her life, waking up at six to get to the public toilets, cooking for the entire family, going to college, returning home to do the evening shopping,⁵⁷ and cooking dinner again. He doesn't understand the sheer impossibility of finding a private moment in her one room dwelling.

Her experience of Wazirpur is not uncommon, but it is a gendered experience. Even for Feriha, whose regular trips to college take her outside of the neighborhood, her mobility is ordered and contained to a great degree. As a young girl, she insisted on attending a government school that was a fifteen minute walk away, primarily because she preferred "long distance." As she put it, "she liked to wander about." Yet, there are certain things she would not do: She would not, for instance, take a walk alone to the edges of Wazirpur; she would not idle on the streets nor would she go to one of the several food stalls for a cup of tea. This is not to give the impression that women are absent on the streets of the neighborhood. Rather, women are noticeably present. A large number of women run the many small eateries in the area and sell vegetables and other daily essentials; in the evenings, one sees groups of women coming back from work in the factories and as domestic labor; younger girls, returning from their tuition classes fill the streets and lanes; and women crowd the markets doing their evening purchases. Women's public presence then, gives the impression of constant movement, of always being engaged in doing something.⁵⁸

Social space in Wazirpur, thus deeply gendered, has also witnessed rather violent contestations in terms of class. In the mid-1990s, a young man from the workers' settlements was beaten to death for defecating in a public park in a neighboring affluent colony.⁵⁹ The memory of this incident surfaces regularly in conversations, and there is a deep awareness of the unequal access to city space. In the recent decades, Delhi has witnessed a great rise in projects of urban renewal and beautification (which nearly always involve slum demolitions), as well as investments in spaces of consumption for the affluent. This has been accompanied by progressive erosion of space available to the city's working poor—not merely their homes but also their places of leisure. The glittering malls, bars, and restaurants that mark Delhi's vision of a "world class city" have minimal room for people like Feriha and Aarti. Through a look at the

actual sites of “dating” and the fantasies around it, we can map the ways in which the city is accessed and imagined by working class young women from Wazirpur.

For Feriha as well as for Aarti, these romantic relationships involve not only the couple but also rely on the help and support of a wide range of figures. During Emir’s occasional visits to Delhi, another elaborate apparatus of subterfuge and concealment has to be deployed. On the days that Emir is in Delhi, Feriha would tend to stay out later and more frequently. To support this, she would invent more classes, more intense study activities, and so on. Delhi University with its sprawling lawns, cheap canteens, and quiet corners remains the favored place for a “date.” The city’s public parks have, for decades, offered refuge to lovers. In recent years, however, growing vigilante attacks by conservative groups against couples in public spaces has introduced new dangers. Faced with ever shrinking spaces for romance, Feriha now has to find alternatives. One is the Delhi metro. A ride in the air conditioned metro car, where the two of them could legitimately share space, offers a fleeting promise of romance. Other possibilities point to her aspirations. She would have liked to go with Emir to a Starbucks or a Café Coffee Day, if they were more welcoming and not so prohibitively expensive.

Aarti relies on a select and reliable network of friends and cousins to conduct her romance. Unlike Feriha and some other young women (whose primary tool of romantic communication is through the mobile phone), Aarti does not own a smart phone. She does, however, own a sim card.⁶⁰ This is inserted into the phones of her friends, whenever she needs to contact her boyfriend. Though he is her neighbor, the possibilities of her interacting with him freely are extremely limited. His breaks from the steel rolling mill rarely ever coincide with Aarti’s free time. It is only on rare occasions that she manages to steal away to their rooftop terrace to meet him.⁶¹ For other couples in the area as well, the rooftops of the *jhuggis* are a place for romantic rendezvous. Given the proximity of the houses and the constant circulation of family and neighbors on the streets, the terrace—elevated from this dense spatial mesh—affords some privacy. In many cases, the rooftops are accessible only through ladders, which limits who accesses them and when.

In Aarti’s imagination of an ideal date, we glimpse how aspirational spaces appear to working-class women. For Aarti, the one place she would like to go with her boyfriend is a pub in a mall. She has never been to one, but she has a notion of what it involves. First, she tells me, she would need to change the way she dresses. She would have to shed her usual attire of a *churidaar kameez* and wear jeans; change her sandals for boots with a side zip. She would dance and while others might be drinking, she would not. At this point, she does not own a pair of jeans; so when I asked whether she would buy a pair, she replied that clothes are often rented out in a pub. She would go after finishing her morning chores, at 11:30, after setting out a competent and believable web of lies about her whereabouts.

Conclusion

For the families in Block A, Wazirpur Industrial Area, questions of romantic intimacy are not confined to the individual's inner worlds, but are debated, discussed, and contested in the homes and streets of the neighborhood. A study of the intimate cannot, thus, be located simply in the individual but has to also consider the entire constellation of social and spatial relationships that govern life in Delhi. The social, the domestic, and the interior worlds of Wazirpur are constituted by the enduring connections between the city and the village, the anxieties, aspirations, and hopes surrounding love and conjugality, and the various competing registers for regulating intimacy. The relationships of intimacy themselves are not static. At different stages in the life cycle and in different historical moments, they present shifting configurations of social (dis)approval, gender dynamics, and socio-spatial relations. While we can identify the import of romantic love in the younger generation of Wazirpur's women, the actual mechanics of formalizing conjugal relations remain deeply tied to pragmatic considerations. Nevertheless, in the extreme narrowness of contemporary Wazirpur and the abysmal conditions of life there, romance and desire—as they are imagined, articulated, and performed—offer small (and sometimes radical) windows of possibility.

NOTES

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1. A search of the *Times of India* archives reveals the debates that were raging in the English language press through the 1930s over the place of love in the nuptial bond. Related to these were discussions of elopement and the “restoration” of women to their natal families. Popular culture reflected these concerns—the dynamics of romance, courtship, and conjugality shifting over the decades. Scholars who have examined filmic repertoires of love suggest that in the immediate post-Independence period, romance appeared as a way of mapping social tensions. As a narrative device, romance as transgression was gradually replaced through the 1990s by romance as a way of restoring the joint family. The conversations around choice and social norms have surfaced with greater virulence in present day India. The means of resolving this tension have been varied—from the violent, sometimes homicidal imposition of family and community authority to the elision of its transgressive potential through the design of the “love-cum-arranged” marriage. The heightened social paranoia that has accompanied Hindu nationalist mobilization is often articulated over the question of conjugal choice—seen in the violent campaigns against “love jihad.” The preservation of caste boundaries through violence on those who breach them has been similarly well documented. For more, please see *The Times of India*, May 5, 1932; May 9, 1932; December 20, 1934; January 3, 1935; July 17, 1955. For shifts in the representations of romantic love in popular cinema, please see, among others, Rachel Dwyer, *All You Want Is Money, All You Need Is Love: Sex and Romance in Modern India* (London, 2000); “Yeh Shaadi Nahi Ho Sakti! (“This Wedding Cannot Happen!”): Romance and Marriage in Contemporary Hindi Cinema,” in *(Un)Tying the Knot: Ideal and Reality in Asian Marriage*, ed. GW Jones and K. Ramdas (Singapore, 2004); Jyotika Viridi, *The Cinematic Imagination [Sic]: Indian Popular Films as Social History* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2003); Patricia Uberoi, “The Diaspora Comes Home: Disciplining Desire in Ddlj,” *Contributions to Indian sociology* 32, 2 (1998); A very small

selection of work focusing on the violence surrounding inter-community relationships include: Charu Gupta, "Hindu Women, Muslim Men: Love Jihad and Conversions," *Economic and Political Weekly* (2009); Pervez Mody, "Love and the Law: Love-Marriage in Delhi," *Modern Asian Studies* 36, 01 (2002); Prem Chowdhry, *Contentious Marriages, Eloping Couples: Gender, Caste, and Patriarchy in Northern India* (New Delhi, 2007).

2. See, for instance, Pervez Mody, *The Intimate State: Love-Marriage and the Law in Delhi* (London, 2008); Henrike Donner, "One's Own Marriage': Love Marriages in a Calcutta Neighbourhood," *South Asia Research* 22, no. 1 (2002); Christiane Brosius, *India's Middle Class: New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity* (London, 2012); Francesca Orsini, *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History*, vol. 62 (Cambridge, 2006).

3. Some (and certainly not exhaustive) exceptions to the trend include, Jonathan P. Parry, "Ankalu's Errant Wife: Sex, Marriage and Industry in Contemporary Chhattisgarh," *Modern Asian Studies* 35, 4 (2001); Jonathan Parry, "The Marital History of 'a Thumb-Impression Man'," *Telling lives in India: Biography, autobiography, and life history* (2004); Shalini Grover, *Marriage, Love, Caste and Kinship Support: Lived Experiences of the Urban Poor in India* (New York, 2017); Samita Sen and Nilanjana Sengupta, "Marriage, Work and Education among Domestic Workers in Kolkata," *Economic and Political Weekly* (2012).

4. I have conducted detailed interviews with the women of three families, along with more informal conversations with other women in Wazirpur. My conversations with men have been rather cursory; mediated in many cases, through the women that I have interviewed systematically. Partly, this was to do with my own gender position, the ease with which I got access to women's spaces, and the slight awkwardness that invariably accompanied my entry into exclusively male spaces.

5. Narayan details a similar tendency in her research. Kirin Narayan, "Honor is honor, after all: silence and speech in the life stories of women in Kangra, North-West India" in *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*, ed. David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (Bloomington, IN, 2004).

6. For an exploration of these dimensions of life stories, see also David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn, *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History* (Bloomington, IN, 2004).

7. Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History," *History workshop journal* 12, 1 (1981).

8. Sumangala Damodaran, "The Shape/Ing of Industrial Landscapes: Life, Work and Occupations in and around Industrial Areas in Delhi," in *Space, Planning and Everyday Contestations in Delhi* (Springer, 2016).

9. Khanna Knitting and Hosiery Works vs. Delhi Development Authority, November 4, 2004.

10. "Custodial Death and Police Firing-a Tale of Two Cities," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, 16 (1995).

11. *The Hindu*, January 3, 2015.

12. In November 2016, the Prime Minister of India declared the Rs.500 and Rs.1000 note to be invalid, overnight. In areas such as Wazirpur, where much of the financial transactions are carried out in cash, production was badly hit. The production orders had dwindled, many workshops in the area shut down, and several workers went back to their villages.

13. Damodaran observes a similar composition of the population in Wazirpur. Sumangala Damodaran, "The Shape/Ing of Industrial Landscapes: Life, Work and Occupations in and around Industrial Areas in Delhi" in *Space, Planning and Everyday Contestations in Delhi* (India, 2016).

14. All names have been changed.

15. Zulekha, Sunita interviews. Thorner in an older piece and Joshi, more recently attest to similar patterns of marriage and migration. Alice Thorner and Jyoti Ranadive, "Household as a First Stage in a Study of Urban Working-Class Women," *Economic and Political Weekly* (1985); Seema Joshi, "Marriage, Migration and Labour Market-a Case Study of a Slum Area in Delhi," *Indian Journal of Regional Science* 37, 1 (2005).

16. A neighboring locality

17. Though exact statistics are difficult to arrive at, studies suggest that women's share in formal employment is at roughly 5 percent while in informal employment, women make up around 25 percent of the labor force. Samita Sen and Nilanjana Sengupta, "Marriage, Work and Education among Domestic Workers in Kolkata," *ibid.* (2012). For a discussion of gendered

dimensions of informal labour, see for instance, Jeemol Unni, "Gender and Informality in Labour Market in South Asia," *Economic and Political Weekly* (2001).

18. "Marriage, Work and Education among Domestic Workers in Kolkata."

19. As other work on Delhi has shown, there are, of course, a wide variety of migration patterns in Delhi. For instance, Mukherjee discusses the solo migration of Bengali women to work as paid domestic labor in Delhi. Neela Mukherjee, "Migrant Women from West Bengal: Ill-Being and Well-Being," *Economic and Political weekly* (2001).

20. The village as a site for acceptable marital negotiations is revealed not only in oral narratives but also in legal matters. Of special significance are the multiple court cases that have been filed in Wazirpur over charges of kidnapping and abduction, which sharply bring out the social tensions over self-chosen marriages.

21. See, for instance, Sylvia Vatuk, *Kinship and Urbanization: White Collar Migrants in North India* (Berkeley, 1972); Grover, *Marriage, Love, Caste and Kinship Support: Lived Experiences of the Urban Poor in India*.

22. Caroline Osella, "Desires under Reform: Contemporary Reconfigurations of Family, Marriage, Love and Gendering in a Transnational South Indian Matrilineal Muslim Community," *Culture and Religion* 13, 2 (2012).

23. That said, there is a gradual shift as an increasing number of families are beginning to buy "plots" of land in the outlying areas of Delhi.

24. Grover, *Marriage, Love, Caste and Kinship Support: Lived Experiences of the Urban Poor in India*, 103. Most young women in Wazirpur are self-confessed "Delhi girls," an identity that they seem to carry with comfort and pride.

25. In a piece on domestic workers in Calcutta, Sen and Sengupta have argued that the gender dynamics that privilege early marriage for women also enables an easy entry into paid domestic work. This relationship between work and marriage among urban poor women, they point out, could be destabilized by education. In the case of Feriha and her sisters, we can observe a not entirely unusual phenomena, where young women work as part time paid domestic labor while continuing with their education. Interestingly, they worked in the homes of their teachers—a deeper exploration of such labor practices would lead us to other forms of exploitation, where the domain of formal education intersects with informal labor regimes. Sen and Sengupta, "Marriage, Work and Education among Domestic Workers in Kolkata."

26. Paying guest accommodation, a common form of residential arrangement across India.

27. With regard to articulations of love in Hindi cinema, Rachel Dwyer argues that the use of English in declaring love is linked to the emergence of English as the "global language of the youth." In Wazirpur, such cinematic repertoires of love continue to frame the expressions of romance and courtship. See, Rachel Dwyer, "Kiss or Tell? Declaring Love in Hindi Films," in *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History*, ed. Francesca Orsini (Cambridge, 2006).

28. In particular, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (released 1995). Feriha's retelling of their first meeting explicitly references *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, where in one of the film's most iconic scenes, the male protagonist silently pleads with his love interest to turn back to look at him. For a deeper discussion on DDLJ and its narrative of romance, family, and kinship, please see, Uberoi, "The Diaspora Comes Home: Disciplining Desire in Ddlj."

29. Grover, *Marriage, Love, Caste and Kinship Support: Lived Experiences of the Urban Poor in India*; Mody, *The Intimate State: Love-Marriage and the Law in Delhi*.²⁹Ibid.

30. See, for instance, Veena Das, "Masks and Faces: An Essay on Punjabi Kinship," *Contributions to Indian sociology* 10, 1 (1976); Patricia Uberoi, "When Is a Marriage Not a Marriage? Sex, Sacrament and Contract in Hindu Marriage," *ibid.* 29, 1–2 (1995).

31. Veena Das, "Masks and Faces: An Essay on Punjabi Kinship," *ibid.* 10, 1 (1976).

32. Amita Tyagi Singh and Patricia Uberoi, "Learning To'adjust': Conjugal Relations in Indian Popular Fiction," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 1, 1 (1994); Patricia Uberoi, "A Suitable Romance? Trajectories of Courtship in Indian Popular Fiction," *Images of the modern woman in Asia: Global media, local meanings* (2001).

33. Grover demonstrates that the post-marital support extended to women is often linked to the kind of marriage she has contracted. For Feriha, too, the anxieties of forging a marital union against the wishes of her family are partly tied to the dreaded possibility of familial ostracization.

34. Mody, *The Intimate State: Love-Marriage and the Law in Delhi*, 114.

35. Apart from relying on support from her brother, she has also begun applying for government jobs; the financial independence and the social privileges/security that would come with government employment would allow her to negotiate the tricky terrain of inappropriate love.

36. The main difference between an abduction and a kidnapping centers around age of majority. One court judgement reads section 376 IPC as, "if the girl was eighteen or over, she could only be abducted but not kidnapped, but if she was under eighteen, she could be kidnapped as well as abducted if the taking was by force or enticement through deceitful means." See, Manju and the State vs. Govind and Others, 30 July, 2010, 11. For an ethnography of love marriage and its contested social and legal representations, see also Pervez Mody, "Kidnapping, Elopement and Abduction: An Ethnography of Love-Marriage in Delhi," in *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History*, ed. Francesca Orsini (Cambridge, 2006).

37. Ibid.

38. Emma Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi* (Berkeley, 2003).

39. Sen and Sengupta report similar findings among domestic workers in Kolkata, where there is little awareness or interest in legally registering marriages. Sen and Sengupta, "Marriage, Work and Education among Domestic Workers in Kolkata."

40. Sister's husband.

41. A symbolic ritual wherein they would exchange garlands in a temple.

42. Since I have not yet been able to interview the couples in question, both these incidents of elopement have been sketched out from Roopa's and Feriha's recollections, respectively.

43. In a horrific incident in June 2010, Monica and her husband, Kuldeep, and Monica's cousin, Shobha, were killed by their male relatives near Wazirpur. The three victims and the three perpetrators grew up Wazirpur village, adjacent to the Wazirpur industrial area. The caste composition and social texture of the two areas are quite distinct and I have not examined the dynamics of romantic love in the urban village of Wazirpur; a comparison of these two adjacent spaces might offer fruitful lines of future inquiry. See *The Indian Express*, June 26, 2010; *The Hindu*, June 25, 2010; *The Guardian*, June 25, 2010.

44. In the case of middle class families in Kolkata, Donner highlights the stigma of premarital sexual intimacy and addresses the investments made by parents in monitoring their daughters. Parental involvement in forming the marital bond, she suggests, is deeply tied to Bengali middle class identity. Parry has identified coeval shifts in the form of and the value placed on the conjugal bond with the changes in employment regimes. He contends that greater salience and emphasis is accorded to the couple and the indissolubility of the nuptial bond in the milieu of formal sector, permanent workers, while marital ties were far more fluid among informal, contract workers. In Wazirpur, one can find a variety of conjugal configurations; yet, it is also pertinent to recognize the strategies and attention devoted to maintaining social honor and reputations among primarily informal sector workers. This stress placed on reputation accompanies, as other scholars have shown, normative gendering and an adherence to notions of patriarchal honor. Henrike Donner, "Doing It Our Way: Love and Marriage in Kolkata Middle-Class Families," *Modern Asian Studies* 50, 4 (2016); Jonathan P Parry, "Ankulu's Errant Wife: Sex, Marriage and Industry in Contemporary Chhattisgarh," *ibid.* 35 (2001); Grover, *Marriage, Love, Caste and Kinship Support: Lived Experiences of the Urban Poor in India*.

45. Interviews, Rekha, Pujja, Priyanka, and Neha.

46. Nandita Banerjee Dhawan, "The Married 'New Indian Woman': Hegemonic Aspirations in New Middle-Class Politics?," *South African Review of Sociology* 41, 3 (2010).

47. A middle caste/backward caste (traditionally potters).

48. While her understanding of the law and the legal apparatus is relatively hazy, this points to the awareness she exhibits towards the possibilities afforded by the law.

49. Mody, "Love and the Law: Love-Marriage in Delhi."

50. Recent literature on South Asia has engaged with Giddens' contention that intimacy is linked to the "pure relationship" based on sexual and emotional equality, entered into for its own sake and allowing for the possibility of de-coupling once the relationship is no longer satisfying for both parties. The pure relationship, Giddens suggests, offers a powerful potential for democratizing gender relations. The wider implication of his assertion signals a global trend toward companionate marriage centered around romantic love and individual choice rather than on social and familial demands. Parry's study of conjugal relations in Bhilai marks a

crucial intervention, wherein he observes a new emphasis on the couple but contends that this is accompanied not by the possibility of de-coupling but, paradoxically, by an emphasis on the indissolubility of the union. Querying Parry's claim that marriage for the younger (and more upwardly mobile) generation in Bhilai is shifting from being based on pragmatic considerations toward love and intimacy, Osella argues that conjugal relations in South Asia retain continuities with older forms of marriage, even while they are being simultaneously transformed. Other writings on the subject similarly question the transitional model postulated by Giddens. In her study of literacy and social change, Laura Ahearn traces changing ideas of selfhood and agency and draws attention to the processes by which "modernity" is inscribed within the institution of marriage. Donner on Kolkata's middle classes, for instance, points out that "modern" romantic love can also coexist with a resurgence of "traditional values." In Wazirpur, the two categories of "love" and "arranged" marriage remain powerful at the discursive level; everyday experiences of conjugality, on the other hand, point to a range of intimate configurations. While the circulation of "globalized" ideas of love and romance shape the romantic fantasies, these does not seem to be a unilinear shift towards a companionate ideology. Rather, ideas of love and romance are deeply embedded in and engage with customary social practice. For a more detailed exposition of the various ways in which emergent ideas of love and marriage have been discussed in scholarly literature, please see Jonathan P. Parry, "Ankalu's Errant Wife: Sex, Marriage and Industry in Contemporary Chhattisgarh," *ibid.* 35, 4 (2001); Osella, "Desires under Reform: Contemporary Reconfigurations of Family, Marriage, Love and Gendering in a Transnational South Indian Matrilineal Muslim Community"; Laura M. Ahearn, *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change in Nepal* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2001); Donner, "Doing It Our Way: Love and Marriage in Kolkata Middle-Class Families."; Anthony Giddens, *The Transformations of Intimacy* (Cambridge, 1992).

51. For other contexts, please see Kabita Chakraborty, *Young Muslim Women in India: Bollywood, Identity and Changing Youth Culture* (London, 2015).

52. Sudhir Kakar, *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* (Chicago, IL, 1990).

53. Patricia Uberoi has observed the gendered asymmetry of marital "adjustments" in Indian women's popular romantic fiction, where the "adjustment" or the resolution of early marital conflict is primarily to "reconcile a woman to her loss of autonomy, individuality and selfhood in relation to her husband." Aarti's adjustment appears to be more layered—in which, public adherence to dominant codes of behavior coexists with transgression.

54. Mody observes, for instance, in Delhi, that love marriages are often seen to be based on "lust" and sexual desire, and therefore are antithetical to socially approved unions. For Haryana, Prem Chowdhury argues that a "self arranged marriage is considered no marriage at all." In Mayadevi's testimony, perhaps, we can see trace a similar assertion; through emphasizing that her marriage was *not* based on romantic love, she affirms its social validity. See for instance, Mody, "Kidnapping, Elopement and Abduction: An Ethnography of Love-Marriage in Delhi"; Chowdhry, "Contentious Marriages, Eloping Couples."

55. Often, the "bad environment" of Wazirpur is presented as the rationale for the many early marriages in the area.

56. A cheap smartphone is available in India for about Rs. 2000 (roughly, \$30).

57. Since their family does not own a fridge, groceries are bought daily.

58. For a deeper reflection on the question of loitering, please see Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, *Why Loiter?: Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (India, 2011).

59. Amita Baviskar, "Between Violence and Desire: Space, Power, and Identity in the Making of Metropolitan Delhi," *International Social Science Journal* 55, 175 (2003).

60. She insists that her limited access to a phone has not only hindered this current relationship but also would have changed the course of her marriage. She places the blame for her currently unhappy marriage, partly on her family, partly on her relatives and caste elders, and most explicitly on the lack of access to a cell phone during her marital negotiations. Had she had recourse to a phone, which she could have used without excessive interference, she would have had the possibility of registering her unhappiness to her would-be husband. Her ability to negotiate the terms of conjugality would have, according to her, acquired a different charge.

61. See also Manju and the State vs. Govind and Others, July 30, 2010. Furthermore, Aarti's narrative of courtship reflects a template similar to Feriha's.