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## Redefining Matrimony: Cultural Shifts and the Modernization of Marriage

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the evolving perceptions and practices of marriage traditions in Kirtipur, Nepal, through a qualitative lens using phenomenological interviews. By engaging with three individuals, an 80-year-old woman reflecting on her deeply rooted religious wedding, a 50-year-old father preparing for his daughter's marriage amidst rising modern influences, and a recently married 28-year-old woman embracing globalization and the research uncovers how generational shifts have impacted the cultural, financial, and emotional meanings of marriage. The findings show that while traditional values still hold emotional weight, younger generations are increasingly guided by trends, aesthetics, and social media expectations. Here, all respondents reflect a shared sense of purpose and meaning behind the marriage ritual, indicating that while the form changes, the essence remains intact.

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### Introduction

Marriage is a fundamental social institution that has been practiced across societies for ages to ensure familial stability, social continuity, and personal companionship. As a key component of social structure, marriage helps regulate relationships, assigns roles, and provides a framework for the upbringing of future generations. Different cultures and communities across the world recognize and practice various forms of marriage, shaped by religious, legal, economic, and traditional contexts.

The term *marriage* comes from the Latin root *maritare*, meaning "to unite" or "to give in marriage." It implies the union between individuals, often between a man and a woman, for the purpose of forming a



family and maintaining social order. Historically and globally, marriage has evolved from being a sacred and community-centered institution to a more personal and contractual agreement between individuals. Despite the shift, it still holds significance as a means of securing social legitimacy and emotional security. Anthropologists and sociologists define marriage as both a cultural and legal arrangement involving rights and obligations between spouses and sometimes between their families. Scholars like Majumdar (1977), Sriram (1993), and Desai (1995) highlight marriage as a pivotal element of society that regulates gender roles, inheritance, sexual relations, and child-rearing. It also acts as a key institution for social control and stability.

Marriage is not only a symbol of emotional union but also a reflection of societal values and economic responsibilities. Harry & Johnson (2017) emphasized that marriage plays a crucial role in ensuring social continuity and support, while Malinowski (1988) saw it as a social necessity for childbearing and upbringing. Horton & Hunt (1976) noted that most societies have developed rules around marriage to ensure social harmony and order.

In Nepal, the forms of marriage reflect the country's diversity ranging from monogamy, polygamy, arranged marriage, love marriage, inter-caste unions, to modern patterns like court marriage, serial monogamy, DINK (Double Income No Kids), cohabitation, and long-distance living arrangements (Manning, 2007). These trends indicate how Nepali society has been influenced by changing social, economic, and cultural dynamics.

Nepal's society is traditionally patriarchal, religiously grounded, and socially stratified, with marriage seen as a crucial life event. However, social transformations in recent decades due to urbanization, education, migration, and media have led to diverse expressions of marriage. Especially in areas like Kirtipur, Kathmandu, we can observe significant shifts in marital trends and expectations. It has become a site of convergence for people from various regions and backgrounds, bringing together different traditions and lifestyles. This has created a melting pot of old values and new aspirations.

Given these rapid changes, it is important to study how marriage patterns are evolving within such a dynamic and growing urban context. Understanding these shifts not only helps reflect social transformation but also provides insight into changing gender roles, values, and the institution of family itself.



## Objectives of the Study

This study has been carried out to explore the social changes observed in the patterns of marriage within Nepalese society. The specific objectives are:

- I. To examine the traditional and contemporary forms of marriage practices in Nepal and understand their social and cultural significance.
- II. To analyze the societal transformations that have influenced shifts in marital practices, with a particular focus on legal, cultural, and generational perspectives.

## Research Questions

- I. What are the traditional and emerging forms of marriage observed in Nepali society today?
- II. How have legal, cultural, and social factors contributed to the changing nature of marriage practices?

## Statement of the Problem

Marriage is a key institution in every society, deeply connected to cultural, social, religious, and legal values. Over time, the forms and meanings of marriage have evolved due to various historical, social, economic, and political changes. In Nepali society, especially in the past, people followed strict traditional norms regarding food, behavior, and social roles. These customs reflected the broader values and organization of society. Traditionally, marriage was shaped by caste, gender, and rigid social roles. However, urbanization, modernization, education, and media have gradually influenced and changed how people think about and practice marriage. As societies develop, significant shifts in attitudes, expectations, and behaviors around marriage have been observed. This change is not unique to Nepal. Similar patterns have been seen in other societies as well, where social development has transformed family and marital structures (Srinivas, 1977).

In Nepal, social transformation has led to noticeable changes in the structure and nature of marriage. Today, legal awareness and increasing individual freedom have affected how people view marriage. Education, employment, and modernization have introduced new cultural patterns in family life. Especially in cities, there are more cases of love marriages, inter-caste marriages, court marriages, and even cohabitation. These practices reflect changing values, priorities, and lifestyles. With these shifts, marriage is no longer solely about fulfilling traditional roles. It now involves emotional compatibility,



personal choice, and practical needs. This is also supported by findings from previous studies, which show that younger generations are redefining marriage by giving priority to education, careers, and mutual understanding (Baraili, 2005). In three decades, the number of diverse marriage patterns has significantly increased in Nepal.

New practices like late marriages, small family sizes, and conscious parenting have become more common. Social institutions such as education, media, and the legal system have contributed to this shift in perspective. Traditional roles are being questioned, and new forms of relationships are emerging. People now focus more on communication, emotional support, and shared responsibilities in marriage.

Past census reports also highlight these trends. For example, Retherford & Thapa (1998) showed that education and women's empowerment directly influence marriage patterns. Similarly, McDaniel (1969) and Miles (2000) observed that as social development increases, so does the diversity in marriage practices. In Nepal, traditional values continue to exist alongside modern ideas. In rural areas, arranged marriages based on caste and family ties are still common. However, in urban and semi-urban areas like Kirtipur, changing attitudes are more visible. Here, people from different regions and cultures live together, making it an ideal place to study changing marriage trends. The need to study the changing patterns of marriage has become even more important, especially after the 2021 census, which shows clear signs of transformation in family and marital structures. Therefore, Kirtipur has been selected as the research site to understand how social, cultural, and legal shifts have shaped marriage patterns in present-day Nepal.

## Literature Review

**Khadka (2020)** explains that literature, especially in the context of social development, has transitioned from being merely a source of entertainment to becoming a means of expressing societal concerns. He argues that literature increasingly mirrors individual struggles and societal transformations. This perspective is relevant to the present research as it provides a framework to analyze how narratives around marriage have evolved over time and reflect broader social shifts in Nepal.

**Morgan (2018)** introduces the classification of social progress into three stages: savagery, barbarism, and civilization. His evolutionary theory of society helps in understanding how marriage institutions have evolved in tandem with social development. This framework supports the present study in contextualizing marriage as a dynamic social construct rather than a static institution.



**The Week Staff (2020)** highlights that one of the earliest known literary works, *The Tale of Two Brothers* (c. 1350 BC), depicts themes of loyalty and betrayal within familial and marital contexts. This historical reference provides evidence that literature has long been used to document and reflect on marital relationships. For this research, it validates the relevance of literature as a lens to study evolving marriage patterns.

**Laura (2017)** critiques the male-dominated nature of early literary traditions and emphasizes the absence of women's voices in classical literature. She asserts that with time, literature began to question patriarchy and represent diverse identities. Her work is significant to this study as it underscores the need to analyze marriage not just as a legal or social institution, but also as one shaped by gender dynamics.

**Ramesh (2018)** views literature as a tool for social change. He believes that when societies experience injustice or imbalance, literature can raise awareness and foster transformation. His insights are valuable in analyzing how literary narratives around marriage have played a role in challenging traditional norms and promoting alternative forms of relationships.

**Abraham (2021)** focuses on feminist literature and its role in reclaiming women's voices in a historically patriarchal literary landscape. He argues that feminist writings seek to reconstruct identity and dignity in both public and private spaces. This is crucial for the current study, which seeks to understand how women's agency within marriage has evolved in response to social change.

**Kafle (2021)** discusses how early Nepali feminist literature began to portray women's lived experiences, focusing on themes such as suppression, gender roles, and identity. His analysis informs this study by providing historical context to the changing discourse around marriage in Nepal.

**Nepal (2020)** traces the emergence of women writers in Nepal and their shift from personal reflections to bold commentary on social injustices. He identifies the role of writers like Banira Giri in establishing a distinctly Nepali feminist voice. This helps the current study frame marriage patterns as part of a broader feminist discourse within the country.

**Pandey (2017)** highlights the rise of contemporary Nepali feminist writers who explore complex themes like gender identity, sexuality, and cultural expectations. His work directly supports this study by offering recent examples of how literature reflects shifting social attitudes towards marriage, love, and partnership.



## Research Methodology

This study is based on a **qualitative research approach**, aimed at understanding the lived experiences and changing perceptions of individuals regarding marriage practices in Nepali society. A qualitative framework allows for a deeper exploration of cultural, emotional, and social meanings attached to the institution of marriage. The goal is not to quantify patterns but to interpret and describe them based on real-life narratives and contexts.

The research design is primarily **exploratory and descriptive in nature**. It adopts a **phenomenological analysis** to capture the subjective experiences of individuals affected by or participating in the evolving forms of marriage. By using this approach, the study seeks to uncover how people themselves perceive and explain the shift from traditional to more modern or hybrid forms of marriage.

To collect data, **three in-depth interviews** were conducted with purposively selected individuals from Kirtipur Municipality. The first interviewee is an **80-year-old woman** who has experienced marriage herself and witnessed the transition of marriage practices over the decades. The second is a **50-year-old man** who is preparing for his daughter's marriage and observes the changing cultural traditions. The third participant is a **28-year-old woman** who recently got married and shares her perceptions about modern marriage, reflecting on whether she views these changes positively or negatively. These interviews were designed to align with the research objectives and provide rich qualitative data **for thematic analysis** through phenomenological interpretation.

## Results

### Cherishing Traditions: Marriage as a Sacred Family Ritual

The 80-year-old woman from Kirtipur fondly recalls how weddings in her youth were profoundly spiritual and family-centered events. She described how preparations began a month ahead, involving every family member in sourcing organic plates, jewelry, and food, emphasizing a fully traditional Hindu ceremony. “The Brahmins would spend hours chanting mantras; the wedding was accompanied by bhajans and kirtans, creating a deeply sacred atmosphere,” she reflected. She also reminisced about the era of Nepal’s monarchy, when marriage symbolized not only a union between individuals but a revered cultural rite embedded within religious and royal traditions. This aligns with the findings of Shrestha (2010), who notes that traditional Nepalese weddings historically emphasized religious sanctity and



family involvement as central to marriage rituals. Her memories highlight how older generations perceive marriage as a solemn, sacred covenant shaped by collective familial and spiritual practices.

### **The Cost of Change: Navigating Modern Wedding Expectations**

A 50-year-old father from Kirtipur, preparing for his daughter's marriage, expressed a mixture of admiration and concern over the evolving wedding customs. He observed that contemporary ceremonies now commonly include mehendi, sangeet, and multiple costly events, contrasting sharply with his own relatively simple wedding. "My wedding had the panje baaja playing, and I hosted a modest bhoj with meat, dahi, and rice at my home for relatives and family. It was intimate and affordable," he explained. He expressed surprise and some unease at the increasing expenses and elaborate nature of current celebrations, reflecting a broader societal shift towards more ostentatious weddings. These sentiments echo Pandey's (2017) analysis that middle generations often feel caught between preserving simplicity and accommodating the expanding cultural expectations that elevate financial burdens. His perspective illuminates the challenges faced by parents balancing respect for tradition with pressures to conform to modern, often commercialized, marriage practices.

### **Embracing Modernity: Balancing Tradition and Global Trends**

The 28-year-old newlywed woman from Kirtipur articulates a modern view of marriage that embraces cultural integration and globalization. She stated, "Marriage is a one-time event, and it should be celebrated with colors, photography, and all the technological advancements available today." She emphasized the importance of keeping pace with contemporary trends, acknowledging that her future children might inquire about her wedding experience and that she does not want to be left behind socially. Nonetheless, she is pragmatic about cost management, advocating for smaller guest lists compared to traditional large weddings to reduce expenses. Her reflections mirror findings by Gurung (2021), who highlights that younger generations tend to negotiate between honoring cultural traditions and adapting globalized wedding elements to fit modern lifestyles. This theme illustrates how globalization influences evolving marital customs, encouraging a balance between tradition and innovation.

### **Discussion**

From the three distinct perspectives gathered through the interviews in Kirtipur, it is evident that marriage practices in Nepal are undergoing a significant cultural transition, reflecting generational shifts



and the influence of globalization. The eldest participant's account underscores the deep-rooted traditional and religious values that once defined marriage as a sacred family ritual, fulfilling the objective of understanding historical marriage customs. The middle-aged participant's reflections reveal the tension between maintaining simplicity and adapting to increasingly elaborate and costly ceremonies, addressing the objective related to exploring current challenges in marriage practices. Lastly, the youngest participant's viewpoint highlights the adoption of modern and global trends in wedding celebrations, demonstrating how contemporary Nepalese couples negotiate tradition and modernity. Collectively, these themes confirm that the study's objectives to explore historical practices, contemporary challenges, and evolving perceptions of marriage have been met, offering a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic nature of marriage traditions in Nepal today.

## Conclusion

This study reveals that marriage in Nepal is not just a ceremony but a living reflection of changing times, shaped by history, culture, and modern influences. From the reverence of traditional rituals steeped in religion and family bonds to the practical realities faced by today's parents, and finally to the younger generation embracing global trends while balancing costs, each perspective tells a story of adaptation and continuity. These voices remind us that while customs evolve, the essence of marriage as a meaningful, shared experience remains strong. Understanding this blend of the old and the new is key to appreciating how Nepalese society honors its roots while stepping confidently into the future.

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