

Old-world makers of the match

[Srishti Jha](#), Hindustan Times

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Personalisation in the times of log-ins is the advantage marriage bureaus say they provide — a human intermediary helps the single find a suitable partner who has already been put under scrutiny and deemed fit for marriage by professionals. But to the youth of today are marriage bureaus

still relevant? Do they sound as bad as being “set up” by the elders? Even in a country forever on the swivel between tradition and modernity, it would be presumptuous to predict the survival of old-style marriage bureaus ten years down the line.

Shubh Mangal, a marriage bureau which began providing services in 1991, is one of the surviving few trying to protect the traditional idea of matchmaking, a phenomenon under attack by online matrimony portals.

When simply logging on and finding a partner after browsing millions of entries seems convenient and fuss-free, these marriage bureaus are sticking on to the belief that their personal interest and mediation skills still count for some.

Says P.K Aggrawal, chief coordinator, Shubh Mangal, who started out his marriage bureau by unofficially matchmaking for friends and family: “The idea still works for a lot of people in the conventional setup as well as for those who have tried all the modern means and fail to find a match. We have come across a lot of cases where people have tried fancy online mediums and have faced a lot of trouble and irrelevant matches for their cases. A union like marriage can’t be made in such a mechanical manner. There has to be personal involvement which we provide them with.”

He adds, “We also provide counseling as well as guidance on legal grounds as we feel that our job isn’t over just because we have found a suitable match for the families. We become a part of the union forever.”

Says sociologist Ranjana Kumari, “Any society has different layers of beliefs and methods. The traditional concept of a marriage bureau involves more human contact, which still is a must for a lot of sections. Vernacular newspapers didn’t disappear when television happened. The old marriage bureaus still survive as they serve the specific needs of our conventional societal structure.”

Says Neeta Jha from Sycorian, one of the oldest marriage bureaus in Delhi, “Matchmaking involves a thorough understanding of the culture, religious orientation, financial and social status of the two families involved. It is the understanding of this sensitivity that makes our platform a safer option than a regular online site.”

Old marriage bureaus across the country, however, have mixed emotions about their survival in the marriage market. Says Aarti Chhabria whose marriage bureau is a 27 years old and one of the old bureaus that still runs out of a physical space in Mumbai. “People of the Sindhi community, among many others, are more comfortable dealing with an offline bureau where they know the manager and the owner of the bureau and can meet them or speak to them over the phone.” So the advent of several online match-making bureaus has not affected her business. “When we Indians find it difficult to shop online, how would we be comfortable looking for a life partner online,” adds Chhabria.

Formed in 2000, Astha Marriage Bureau is one of the oldest of its kind in Kolkata. Soumendu Sen, the owner of the bureau, says the absence of traditional ghataks (individuals contacting prospective grooms and brides) created a void in the matrimonial scenario in the city, so allowing Astha to flourish. Initially, Astha had to compete with matrimonial advertisements in papers, and later with online matrimony portals.

So does the bureau have any chance of survival in the future? Sen says it will survive because unlike online matrimony portals, "people can see us and be in physical contact with us." But, he adds, "the greatest challenge might come from Facebook. It is more dangerous than online portals for our business."

today with traditional marriage bureaus having been replaced by online matchmaking sites, the prospective bride and groom choose for themselves, online, whom they like even when they are at work. They are a hassle-free, quick and easy way to advertise yourself among lakhs of people for a small amount. With features like online biodata — which includes photo, astrological information, salary and family details, and even expectations from the partner, these online marriage services have a lot going for them. But they come with their own flaws. While senior advocate Pinky Anand says that "marriages are going more wrong these days, irrespective of what medium made the union happen," she adds that "online mediums are more prone to disasters as they are impersonal and there is less human action involved."

Online matrimonial services are popular because they put the control into the hands of those seeking to marry. For many youngsters, its about taking their own decisions without their family's interference. Says Murugavel Janakiraman, founder and CEO of Bharat Matrimony, "The online medium has phenomenal advantage. We have to progress with changing times. The bureaus lack speed and choices. They need to make some changes in their structure if they want to make it to the future."

However, there remain those who are open, even prefer, the old fashioned, though less jazzy, charm of the marriage bureau. Says Paresh Nagrani, 30, a property consultant in Mumbai who employed the services of an offline marriage bureau to marry Jyotsana, 28, in May this year: "What I like about an offline marriage bureau is that they screen the candidates before sharing the profiles with you, unlike an online marriage bureau that will send out mass emails which doesn't even match your requirements remotely."

Ritika, an NRI from Boston currently in Mumbai scouting for a groom, says: "It was a wonderful experience after being tired of unnecessary virtual trips of matrimonial websites. The bureau owner sat with me and we discussed the minutest details and my specifications. You feel safe with such treatment. You can then depend upon them without wasting a lot of time, money and energy."

Market watchers say that while offline marriage bureaus held their own for quite a while after the digital boom, the online bureaus took off suddenly, and now dominate the market. Says online expert, Prashanto Roy, "While live bureaus initially continued to do well in terms of generating revenues is because for years they have developed and worked on contacts and they had that advantage. But now, however, if we take an overall look at the marriage market, the online portals are showing huge growth."

According to Netscribes, a global market intelligence firm, "The online matrimony market size was valued at around INR 3.8-4 bn in 2011 and is expected to reach around INR 11-12 bn by 2015. There has been a significant increase in the number of profile registrations signifying the growth of this sector in the country. The major challenges online bureaus would face is from competition from the offline market, rural urban barrier & lack of physical infrastructure and presence of fake profiles." Choosing between the two could be like a toss-up between fast food and a slow-cooked duck.

(With inputs from Riddhi Doshi in Mumbai and Orin Basu in Kolkata)