Arnold Schwarzenegger, Ally McBeal and Arranged Marriages: Globalization on the Ground in India

After a decade of frenzied globalization, the rich of India welcome consumer goods and experiment with new arrangements between men and women. But because the economic opportunities of middle-class Indian men have not expended, most of them merely welcome Western media images that reinforce their power and masculine self-image.

BY STEVE DERNÉ

Amit is a member of India’s rising middle class. The 22-year-old left his village to study at an urban university and considers himself a connoisseur of Western fashions. He enjoys watching Arnold Schwarzenegger films and National Basketball Association games beamed to India from the United States. The foreign media reaffirm his self-image as a citizen of the world. Yet at the same time Amit complains that the media threaten Indian family arrangements. “I want an arranged marriage,” Amit says, “but I fear that Fashion Television, MTV, and [music] channel V are distorting the desires of the younger generation.”

India, with a population now in excess of 1 billion, is a massive experiment in “globalization”—the emergence of worldwide markets and communications that increasingly ignore national boundaries. People, jobs, goods, and media move to and from India at unprecedented speed and volume. Global consumer products entice Indians. And Indians, in turn, produce for the global market. Cable and satellite television broadcasts from around the world reach Indian homes and Hollywood has grabbed a significant share of the movie audience (India’s huge “Bollywood” film industry notwithstanding). There is a fear that Western images and ideas will undermine traditional Indian culture. But the reality is more complex.

Largely untouched by globalization are the 80 percent of Indians—mostly rural—who are so poor that they do not even own watches. At the top, the affluent few seek out Western goods and experiment with the freedoms for women and young couples that they see in Western media. But members of the urban middle class are often uneasy about what they see in global media. Men like Amit—who is not affluent, does not speak English fluently and lacks international connections—have absorbed only those media messages that fit their preconceived views of the world. Amit enjoys global media’s celebration of male violence because it reinforces the local culture of male authority, but he rejects images that challenge arranged marriages and restrictions on women. Indeed, men like Amit may become more attached to gender arrangements they see as distinctly Indian precisely because the foreign media challenge them.

The different responses to globalization by the rich, the poor, and the middle class suggest that the new economic opportunities it has brought, rather than the power of new media, are making the greatest changes in contemporary India.

GLOBALIZATION IN INDIA

Over the last two decades, more of what people around the world buy and watch is produced elsewhere; more of what they produce is made for a global market; and more local policies are shaped by outside decision makers. In India, a foreign-exchange crisis in 1991 gave the International Monetary Fund leverage to demand the removal of restrictions on foreign investment and trade. With that economic liberalization, once scarce goods rapidly flowed into the Indian market. Taking advantage of cheap, well-trained labor, computer programming jobs appeared. International financiers arrived. Within five years, imports more than doubled, exports more than tripled and foreign capital investment more than quintupled.

Cultural globalization—international media—quickly followed as global advertisers tried to reach the new Indian market and government restrictions eased. In 1991, cable television in India reached 300,000 homes; in 1999, it reached 24 million. In 1991, only a few foreign films showed in the biggest cities, but by 2001 foreign films were dubbed into Hindi and screened throughout the country.

Given new opportunities for employment, consumption, and entertainment, affluent urban Indian men aspired to new goods and experimented with changes in family life. In contrast, studies show that the lives of middle-class Indian men have not been significantly transformed and while the research is less conclusive, the contrast seems to apply to women as well. (Unfortunately, the effects of globalization on poor urban and rural Indians have not been sufficiently studied—although we do know that rural and urban poverty have increased slightly since 1991.)

**Affluent Indians’ Consumerism and Cosmopolitanism**

In Spring 2001, I watched two college women flirting with a young college man on a fast, air-conditioned train. All three wore jeans and Western-style shirts and spoke exclusively in English. They passed copies of Cosmopolitan and Time magazines back and forth. After asking the young man about his education and family, one of the young women asked the man if he was flirting with her. “Are you pulling my leg?” the young man replied. “What do you want me to pull?” countered the woman provocatively. Later, she asked the man, “Do you have a car? Will you take me for a ride?” Affluent urbanites, like these young people, experiment with foreign lifestyles and participate in Western consumerism.

Affluent Indians—perhaps 3 percent of all Indians, 10 percent of urban ones—are those with the high incomes (above about $2,150 a year), college degrees, and English-language skills that allow them to hitch their dreams to the global economy. They can afford scooters, refrigerators, televisions, music systems, and computers, dine at a Pizza Hut or buy Nike shoes, employ at least one full-time servant, send their children to private English-language schools, and arrange back-up supplies to protect against disruption of water or power. Economic liberalization has provided them high-paying jobs oriented to the international market, from computer programming to staffing telephone call centers that serve people on other continents. Before 1991, few international products were available on the open market and there were waiting lists for cars, TVs, air-conditioners and refrigerators. Now, such goods are abundant for those with cash.

Global advertising and cable television celebrate—and make acceptable—a lifestyle furnished with such goods. The affluent urbanites who political scientist Leela Fernandez interviewed in 1998 spoke of new choices of goods as the biggest benefit of economic liberalization. Some said that they had previously felt “guilty” about displaying wealth in a country like India, but that today “consumerism has become an Indian value.”

International advertisers emphasize fashion and style to persuade people to buy more of their products. Media researchers report that young Indian women often say that they watch cable music channels just to see “the hairstyles, the shoes, [and] the clothes.” Anthropologist Susan Parulekar’s recent fieldwork shows that affluent women increasingly pursue the kind of taut bodies that appear in magazines and on television by dieting, working out, and patronizing slimming centers which have proliferated throughout India. Boutique shop owners report that clients have developed “fashion literacy” to refer to styles they see on television. Advertising in English-language magazines aims to incite men’s desire for “Italian look” trousers, “rich look” shirts, and cargo pants with multiple pockets to accommodate sunglasses, a cell phone and mints. Affluent Indians come to see themselves as having more in common with sophisticated consumers around the world than with ordinary Indians.

India’s English-language press has trumpeted globalization as transforming Indian family and gender arrangements; this may be so for the wealthy. Many affluent women tell media researchers that *Ally McBeal* episodes “show the way a girl thinks.” The well-paid jobs which finance consumption and the media celebrations of career women lead more affluent women to go to work—and more affluent men to find such paid work acceptable. As affluent women embrace Western fashion, they increasingly leave restrictions of the home. Such women reject previous cultural inhibitions by participating in musical talent shows at local colleges or on cable television. And, as Jyoti Pur’s research shows, college women who read English-language romance novels now voice strong support for love marriages.
MIDDLE-CLASS INDIANS

Although most ordinary middle-class Indians watch transnational media, they do not embrace new ways of thinking about gender and family. Unable to take advantage of the economic opportunities that fuel new lifestyles, many middle-class Indian men actively resist what they see as the disruptive effects of foreign images and ideas. Often possessing a college degree and a good job, these Indians lack the English-language skills and global contacts that would allow them to participate fully in the new global economy. Such middle-class Indians constitute 16 percent of households India-wide—perhaps 40 percent of the urban population—and earn 45,000–96,000 rupees (US$900–1,920) annually. They work as clerks, police officers, teachers, government transportation workers and in other mid-level civil service positions. They buy few foreign products, preferring a $1 restaurant meal to a $6 Pizza Hut meal, $6 Indian-made shoes to $60 Nike ones. They see themselves as India’s “middle class”—below the position of the “great people” who drive automobiles and travel to foreign places, but well above the position of those who live in slum areas and survive pulling rickshaws or slogging in sweatshops. Middle-class Indians still find most of their jobs in the local job market for local production. They can afford some new consumer goods like televisions, but the structural adjustment policies adopted in 1991 increased the cost of food. Unlike the affluent, their economic opportunities have not been transformed by economic globalization.

But cultural globalization has revolutionized the media middle-class Indians watch and read. Access to television increased from less than 10 percent of the urban population in 1990 to nearly 75 percent by 1999. While Indian movies constitute the bulk of the cinema market, foreign films are available in most cities. In both 1991 and 2001, I interviewed middle-class male moviegoers in the small city of Dehra Dun. In 1991, none of the 22 young men whom I interviewed had seen even one Hollywood film, but in 2001, 16 of 32 similar young men watched Hollywood films regularly. Twenty-two of them now watched cable television, which had been unavailable a decade before.

The exposure to new media shapes middle-class men’s buying patterns. Men wear international brands and pride themselves on “smart dress” modeled on that of their favorite heroes. The global influences are sometimes direct (as in cable television advertising), but are more often transmitted by the local media, like Hindi films, which feature Western fashions, shopping and global name brands. While some middle-class men can afford the global brands, more often they instead hire local tailors to copy the latest fashions.

SUSTAINING FAMILY ARRANGEMENTS

In the Western television programs and Hollywood films middle-class men are watching, love is the basis for marriage. Influenced by such global media, Hindi films increasingly emphasize the search for love as well. The mid-1990s blockbuster *Dil To Pagal Hain (The Heart is Crazy)* famously opens with the heroine voicing her certainty that she’ll find the “soul-mate” who was made for her. Yet the men whom I interviewed in 2001 remain as committed to arranged marriages as were the men I interviewed before the media deluge. One postgraduate engineering student likes film love stories but is convinced that “in actual life, a love marriage would be impossible.” Another 19-year-old student agrees that love marriages shown in films aren’t “possible in real life.” His favorite film features a school teacher who encourages students to pursue love, but he remains certain that “any girl I could find for myself would not be as good as the one my parents will find.” Despite a decade of cultural globalization celebrating love and choice, two-thirds of the young men I interviewed in both 1991 and 2001 said they wanted an arranged marriage.

Other researchers have found the same preference for arranged marriages. In a 1998–1999 study, 65 percent of 15- to 34-year-olds in Delhi, Mumbai, Kanpur, and Lucknow said that they would obey their elders “even if it hurts.” Similarly, 68 percent of urban college students in the mid-1990s preferred to have their parents arrange their marriage. Most low-income, English-speaking college students in Mumbai, Leena Abraham discovered, “thought that love marriages were unsuccessful.” (In all of these studies, women were a bit more likely than men to embrace arranged marriages.)

While international media celebrate independent Ally McBeals who work in offices, middle-class Indian men still want to limit women’s freedom. Some men contrast their free use of cinema halls with women’s home-based lives. Tahsin, a married 25-year-old who sees movies twice weekly, proudly explains that his wife of seven years stays home because she doesn’t like the “seductive dresses of...
the heroines, and is so home-loving that she even objects to seeing movies with her own husband.” Men’s discussion of their favorite heroines focuses on their modesty and femininity. Tahsin doesn’t like many of today’s heroines, complaining that they expose too much of their bodies. Parvez, another 25-year-old who likes cable television and American films, describes Aishwarya Ray as his favorite Hindi film heroine because of her generosity, emphasizing her widely-reported vow to donate her eyes to science when she dies. These men, like most men, want women who do not go out much and focus on helping others.

Wider surveys confirm Indian middle-class men’s ongoing attachment to the conservative arrangements preferred in the decades prior to globalization. Abraham’s interviews show that college-going men want women to be “simple,” “home-loving,” and in possession of a “compromising nature” that makes them “respect elders.” Indeed, many Indians have protested against media that they feel threaten Indian family life. For many years, protesters have targeted Valentine’s Day, attacking couples in restaurants, burning Valentine’s Day cards, and throwing stones at shops selling cards. Other protesters pressure colleges to ban women from wearing jeans and skirts and attack media that show women in revealing clothes. Many Indians demonstrated against Bangalore’s 1996 staging of the Miss World pageant, which they saw as a threat to Indian womanhood.

Although organized by political elites, protests resonate strongly with ordinary middle-class men who are attached to male privilege. Some men bar wives, sisters, and daughters from watching cable television because they believe it will encourage independence. Virendra, the postgraduate engineering student who likes to dress smartly but wants an arranged marriage, avoids foreign media, complaining that “satellite TV is making the younger people too mature.” A civil draftsman whose marriage has just been arranged likes Hollywood movies and cable television, but is disturbed by programming that teaches “the message that... a brother should allow his sister to go with her boyfriend to watch a movie.”

Men’s attitudes are rooted in the economic and family realities middle-class Indians face. Young men rely on parental support in the early years of marriage, often living in joint households. Because middle-class Indian women lack the connections and English-language skills to compete for the new jobs, their husbands want them to work in the home rather than at jobs that do not pay very well. These realities—and men’s personal interest in maintaining control—undermine any acceptance of the love marriages and women’s liberation celebrated in the media. Global media have not much empowered middle-class women, who often must continue to limit their movements outside the home. They watch far fewer films than men do and often rely on other family members to shop in public markets. Most middle-class women continue to face practical and social limitations that are difficult to overcome—even if they enjoy watching cable television depictions of women’s freedoms.

**FURTHERING MALE PRIVILEGE**

Middle-class Indian men reject foreign messages that challenge traditional gender arrangements. But these same men welcome other messages—from the celebration of male violence to the objectification of women—because they fit with and enrich local ideas about male power and privilege. Cultural globalization, absent changes in economic circumstances, is welcomed selectively.

Men in Indian cinema halls continue to clap and shout enthusiastically when the fighting-and-killing heroes of Hindi cinema beat up their opponents. Today, cable television and foreign movies intensify the attraction to violence. Nearly 60 percent of the men who watch American films say they like action sequences. Many talk of Jackie Chan or Arnold Schwarzenegger as favorite heroes because of their fighting ability. Other men like the violence in cable television’s World Wrestling Federation bouts and American action movies, which, they say, “show things the way they actually are.”

Globalization has also brought more foreign pornography to India. Low budget and dubbed into Hindi, foreign films aim at soft-core titillation because Indian censors bar explicit nudity. These films’ foreign pedigree and prestigious venues attract large audiences that include middle-class adults and adolescents. (Age restrictions are not enforced.) In addition, boys now watch foreign pornography in video halls. In Abraham’s study, more than half of the male students had seen pornographic films. This is their main source of information on sex, and these same boys become the men who idealize modesty in women.

But foreign pornographic films intensify the image of women as sexual objects. At screenings of adult films in Dehra Dun, the wholly male audience whistled their enthusiasm when the camera positioned viewers to gaze at on-screen women. Anthropologist Mark Liechty found that in
Kathmandu, Nepal, foreign pornography increased men’s demands on women. Women told him that when men watch pornography they begin to “think of others” in a “bad manner.” Liechty reports that pornography’s influence is magnified because it is associated with prestigious consumer goods, like VCRs, and also because women regard it, not as fantasy, but as a realistic depiction of how women behave in prestigious Western society. Abraham’s research suggests similar reactions in urban India.

Rather than embracing the new ideals presented in Western media, most middle-class Indian men accept only those messages that further elaborate existing ideals, ones that support the usual arrangements that favor men. The glorification of violence and sexual objectification of women in global media reinforces the local culture of male dominance. For the affluent, challenges to arranged marriages introduced by international media make sense because new economic possibilities allow more young couples to support themselves. The affluent are more likely to embrace women’s paid labor because affluent women often have the skills to earn good incomes, and they are more likely to support women’s movements outside the home because they have the income that allows women to shop for desired products. For them, new cultural ideals can work in practice. But because middle-class men’s economic possibilities have not greatly changed, cultural globalization has failed to transform their ideas about family life. Instead, cultural globalization has simply introduced new images that men use to reinforce old ways.

**Recommended Resources**

Abraham, Leena. “Redrawing the Lakshman Rekha: Gender Differences and Cultural Constructions in Youth Sexuality in Urban India.” *South Asia* 24, (2001): 133–156. Abraham’s article shows the limited effect of cultural globalization on young people’s attitudes about gender and family; it also addresses the effects of pornography.


Derné, Steve. “Globalizing Gender Culture.” *Women’s Studies Occasional Papers*, Office of Women’s Research, University of Hawaii—Manoa, forthcoming. This paper provides a fuller discussion of some of the empirical material in this article.


