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### Marriage Systems Have Evolved Through the Ages, Yet Traditions and Cultural Values Continue to Play a Significant Role in Shaping Marriage Practices Today.

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**Abstract:** One of the most significant and ancient institutions in human society is marriage. The marriage system has evolved significantly throughout time in response to social, political, cultural and economic shifts. Historically, marriage was associated with survival, procreation, and maintaining the unity of the family or group. Marriage grew increasingly structured and began to be impacted by property, religion, conventions and family traditions as cultures advanced. The majority of weddings in the medieval era were arranged by families. They were associated with social status, caste and class. Because of the patriarchal nature of the society, males held more authority and women had fewer privileges in marriage. Polygamy, child marriage, and prohibitions on widow remarriage were widespread practices. Many damaging behaviors were questioned throughout the colonial era. New laws and social reform movements tried to improve the condition of women and children. Western education introduced ideas such as equality, consent, and personal choice in marriage. In modern times, marriage has changed even more. Love marriages, inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, divorce right and property rights for women are more accepted today. Overall, the marriage system has slowly moved from strict traditional rules to a more flexible and individual-based institution. However, traditions and cultural values still play a significant role in shaping marriage practices today.

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**Introduction:** One of the oldest and most significant institutions in human society is marriage. Marriage is a part of almost every culture on the planet, however local customs and interpretations vary.

Marriage is a social structure that binds families together, upholds customs and guarantees the continuation of generations. It is more than just a relationship between two individuals. As social, economic, religious and political advancements have shaped society over time, so too has the marriage system. In early human communities, marriage was related to basic needs such as survival, reproduction and protection. It helped create stable family groups and maintain social order. As civilizations developed, marriage became more organized and formal. Rules and



customs were created to regulate relationships between husband and wife. Religion played a strong role in shaping marriage practices and in many societies, marriage was considered sacred and permanent. Property rights, inheritance and family honor also became connected with marriage.

During ancient and medieval times, marriages were mostly arranged by parents or elders. Personal choice was usually not given importance. Marriage was strongly linked to caste, class, and social status. Families often used marriage to maintain their social position or to build alliances. Society was largely patriarchal, which meant that men had more authority and control, while women had fewer rights and limited independence. Practices such as child marriage, dowry, polygamy and restrictions on widow remarriage were common in many regions. Divorce was rare and often socially disapproved.

Traditional marriage systems underwent fresh modifications during the colonial era. People were inspired to think differently about equality, individual rights and consent by Western education and exposure to novel concepts. Social reformers advocated changes to the law and started to examine detrimental customs. To improve the lot of women and children, laws were enacted. Marriage customs gradually changed as a result of these reforms, which also had a slow impact on public opinion.

In modern times, the idea of marriage has further evolved. Greater importance is now given to mutual understanding, companionship and personal choice. Love marriages, inter-caste and inter-religious marriages and legal rights like divorce and property rights for women are becoming more accepted in many societies. Although traditions still influence marriage, it is increasingly viewed as a partnership based on respect and equality.

Therefore, studying the marriage system through different historical periods helps us understand how society itself has transformed. It shows that marriage is not a fixed institution but one that continuously adapts to changing values and social conditions. (Goodrich, Koenig, & Sweet, 1963).

### **Marriage and Family Structure**

Social life has always been organized around marriage and family. From the first human settlements to modern society both institutions have evolved in response to social advancements, cultural norms and economic circumstances. Family arrangements were simple and primarily centered on survival in early human groupings. In certain communities, women played a significant role in the family and marriage customs were not particularly rigid. With the advent of agriculture, people began to concentrate in one area, which strengthened marriages and made families more permanent. In ancient times, marriage became even more significant because it was connected with property ownership, inheritance and continuation of family lineage. Large and joint families were common especially in ancient India where marriage was seen as a religious and social duty rather than a matter of personal choice. It helped preserve customs and maintain social order. During the medieval period, religion and traditions had a strong influence on marriage and family life. Arranged marriages were widely practiced, joint families remained important and women usually had limited independence. Bigger families were often preferred because they supported farming activities and provided financial security. Overall, the structure of marriage and family has always reflected the needs



and beliefs of different historical periods. Earlier systems focused more on stability, tradition and collective living. Over time, gradual social changes prepared the way for more flexible and changing family patterns in later periods. (Viazzo, 1989).

### **Change in marriage and Family in modern times**

In modern times, the system of marriage and family has undergone major changes because of colonial influence, education, urban growth and economic progress. During British rule, several legal reforms were introduced that challenged old customs such as child marriage and supported improvements in women's rights. The spread of modern education encouraged logical thinking and awareness, which helped people question rigid traditions. Gradually, marriage began to be seen not only as a social obligation but also as a bond based on understanding, consent and companionship.

Urbanization and migration also transformed family life. As people moved to cities for jobs and better opportunities, the traditional joint family system started declining and nuclear families became more common. Smaller families suited city living, work pressures and limited space. Today, marriage is increasingly viewed as a personal decision rather than only a family arrangement. Love marriages, inter-caste and inter-religious unions are slowly gaining wider acceptance. Men and women now often share household and professional responsibilities. New forms of family life such as divorce, live-in relationships and single-parent families, though still debated, are becoming more visible. Overall, modern marriage reflects greater equality, independence and flexibility compared to earlier times. (Riley, 1994).

### **Colonial impact on marriage**

British colonial rule played a significant role in changing the traditional marriage system in India. Before the arrival of the British, marriage was mainly controlled by religious beliefs, caste rules and long-standing customs. Practices such as child marriage, polygamy and the ban on widow remarriage were common in many communities. Women generally had very limited rights within marriage and social norms were rarely questioned.

During the colonial period, new laws were introduced that began to challenge these customs. The British administration, along with Indian social reformers, supported legal measures to reduce child marriage and to allow widows to remarry. These reforms did not immediately change society, but they gradually improved the legal status of women. Marriage slowly became a matter not only of religion and tradition but also of legal regulation.

Although most people continued to consider marriage a sacred and lifelong bond, colonial reforms introduced new ideas such as social reform, women's rights and state involvement in personal matters. These early changes created the base for further improvements after independence and helped shape the modern legal framework governing marriage in India.

(Coale & Watkins, 1986).

### **British Intervention and legal reforms**

British rule in India brought important changes to many social institutions including marriage. Before British intervention, marriage practices were mainly controlled by religious customs, caste rules and traditional beliefs. There were no uniform laws, and different communities



followed their own systems. Many practices such as child marriage and restrictions on widow remarriage, were widely accepted and rarely questioned.

When the British established their administration, they gradually began introducing laws to regulate certain social practices. Though they were cautious about interfering in religious matters, they supported reforms that aimed to reduce harmful customs. Laws were passed to fix a minimum age for marriage and to legally permit widow remarriage. These reforms were often influenced by Indian social reformers who demanded change in society.

The British also introduced a legal system where marriage-related disputes could be handled in courts. This made marriage not only a religious institution but also a legal matter. Although these reforms did not completely remove traditional practices, they started a slow process of social change. Overall, British intervention laid the foundation for modern marriage laws and encouraged the idea that social customs could be improved through legislation. (Glick, 1977).

### **Conclusion**

Marriage has never been a stable or unalterable institution, according to research on the system throughout history. It has consistently changed to reflect societal structures, attitudes and requirements. In the past, marriage was primarily associated with societal stability, reproduction and survival. Marriage evolved distinct laws and practices as civilizations grew more structured, impacted by social traditions, property rights and religion. It developed into a formal organization that supported social order and family ties.

In ancient and medieval periods, marriage was strongly controlled by families and community norms. Social factors such as caste, class and status played an important role in deciding marital alliances. Patriarchal ideas were dominant and women often had limited rights and freedom within marriage. Harmful practices such as child marriage, dowry, polygamy and restrictions on widow remarriage were common in many regions. Marriage was seen more as a duty and social responsibility rather than a personal choice.

With the arrival of the colonial period and the growth of social reform movements, many traditional practices were questioned. Reformers and new laws aimed to improve the position of women and protect children. Education introduced ideas of equality, consent and individual rights. These changes did not transform society immediately, but they laid the foundation for future reforms.

Nowadays, marriage is more adaptable and focused on the person. Nowadays, a lot of individuals think that love, respect and understanding should be the foundation of a marriage. Women now enjoy more legal rights such as those pertaining to decision-making, property and divorce. Although there are still obstacles, intercasts and inter-religious marriages are progressively gaining acceptance. However, customs and cultural beliefs still shape how marriage is perceived and carried out.

Overall, the marriage system reflects the broader changes in society. As social values shift, marriage also adapts. While significant progress has been made toward equality and freedom, the influence of tradition remains strong. Therefore, the history of marriage teaches us that social institutions evolve slowly and are shaped by both continuity and change (Glick, 1977).



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