



Research Paper

Marriage Preference among Indian Muslims: Cousin Marriage, Elopement, and Polygyny in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

*This article examines marriage preference among Indian Muslims through three linked practices: cousin marriage, elopement, and polygyny. A common assumption in the literature is that Muslims prefer cousin marriage, especially cross-cousin and parallel-cousin unions, because such marriages preserve property, strengthen lineage solidarity, and fit Islamic social organization. However, ethnographic evidence from India shows substantial variation across communities. Drawing on comparative studies of Pangals in Manipur, Meos of Mewat, Gujar Bakkarwals, Surati Vohras, Delhi Karkhanedars, Punjabi Muslims, and selected Muslim communities in Pakistan and Britain, this article argues that marriage practices are shaped less by religion alone than by local kinship organization, residential proximity, clan or biradari rules, inheritance concerns, gender norms, and cultural borrowing from surrounding social groups. The article also shows that elopement functions as a socially negotiated route to marriage in several communities, often later regularized through *nikah*. Polygyny, though legally permitted in Islam, appears far less prevalent than popular assumptions suggest and is usually driven by specific household circumstances rather than religious prescription. The article concludes that Muslim marriage in India is best understood as internally diverse and locally constructed.*

Keywords: Indian Muslims; cousin marriage; elopement; polygyny; kinship; marriage preference

I. Introduction

Marriage is one of the foundational social institutions through which kinship networks, property transmission, gender relations, and community boundaries are continually reproduced. Far from being a mere union between two individuals, marriage operates as a complex social arrangement that connects distinct households, redistributes material resources, and defines the moral limits of acceptable alliance. Within the scholarship on Muslim societies, marriage is frequently analysed through the lens of kin preference – particularly consanguineous or cousin marriage. A large body of literature has traditionally presented cousin unions as a normative preference among Muslims, arguing that such practices secure female inheritance, protect family wealth, and reinforce solidarity within endogamous lineage groups (Andrey, 2000; Eglar, 1960; Rosenfeld, 1957). Yet, these sweeping, pan-Islamic generalizations often obscure profound regional, historical, and community-level variations.

The Indian ethnographic record is particularly instructive because it radically complicates any simplistic equation between Islamic textuality and a singular, fixed marital pattern. Across the South Asian subcontinent, Muslim communities exhibit highly diverse and contradictory matrimonial behaviours. While some communities treat close cousins as ideal marriage partners, others explicitly avoid such unions, classifying cousins as sibling-like figures due to the moral economies of shared upbringing and everyday co-residence. Furthermore, the mechanisms of marriage vary significantly; alliances may occur through formal parental arrangement, or conversely, through romantic elopements that are only later regularized by the legal contract of *nikah*. Similarly, while polygyny is frequently invoked in public discourse as a ubiquitous Muslim norm, empirical evidence reveals that its actual practice is remarkably rare, falling far short of what the legal allowance would suggest. This profound diversity indicates that while Islamic jurisprudence (*sharia*) establishes a broad framework of permissibility, it does not deterministically dictate actual marital behaviour.

This article argues that marriage preferences among Indian Muslims are contextually produced by a dynamic intersection of legal frameworks, kinship structures, economic imperatives, and localized cultural adjustments. These include residential arrangements, domestic household organization, strategies of property transmission, *biradari* (kin group) or clan configurations, gender norms, and historic acculturation with surrounding non-Muslim communities. Rather than assuming a monolithic “Muslim marital model”, this study adopts a comparative perspective that treats distinct communities as socially specific and historically situated. The central analytical concern is not whether a particular marital practice is legally sanctioned, but how and why it becomes socially preferred, actively avoided, or fundamentally transformed within the textures of everyday life.

Theoretical Framework: Beyond Descent and Alliance

To capture the empirical complexity of South Asian Muslim kinship, anthropological analysis must transcend the rigid classical dichotomy between Descent Theory, historically associated with British structural-functionalism, and Alliance Theory, pioneered by Claude Levi-Strauss (1969).

Levi-Strauss’s structuralist paradigm fundamentally conceptualized marriage as a rule-bound system of exchange between discrete, exogamous groups where women circulate to forge enduring social alliances. However, this framework struggles to account for the phenomenon of lineage endogamy and consanguineous marriage – particularly father’s brother’s daughter (FBD) or general parallel- and cross-cousin marriages. These practices turn the marital exchange inward, seemingly collapsing the structural distinction between the “self” (the kin group) and the “other” (the alliance partner) that Levi-Strauss deemed necessary for social cohesion. Conversely, descent-focused approaches often reduce cousin marriage to a purely utilitarian corporate strategy designed to retain lineage property, defend patrimony, and reinforce segmentary lineages.

The South Asian ethnographic record reveals that neither a purely structural, rules-based alliance model nor a deterministic, lineage-survival model can fully capture the reality of these marital dynamics. Instead, kinship must be analysed through what Bourdieu (1977) terms “practical kinship” – a framework wherein marriage choices are understood as strategic, improvisational responses to lived material realities, historical contingencies, and local moral economies. Furthermore, Carsten’s (2004) concept of “relatedness” is highly instructive here. Carsten reminds us that kinship is not a static biological or genealogical map; rather, it is dynamically “made” and continuously renegotiated through everyday social practices, shared spaces, and substance transmission – such as long-term co-residence and commensality. By synthesizing practical kinship with theories of relatedness, we can see that cousin marriage among South Asian Muslims is neither an inherent religious reflex nor a uniform structural mandate. It is a fluid social practice continually produced at the intersection of lineage strategy and everyday lived interaction.

II. Methodology

This study utilizes an interpretive, qualitative comparative methodology based on a rigorous reading of published ethnographic and sociological monographs. It draws systematically on secondary literature concerning an array of Indian Muslim communities characterized by distinct structural features. These include the Pangals of Manipur, the Meos of Mewat, the Gujar Bakkarwals of Jammu and Kashmir, the Sunni Surati Vohras of Gujarat, the Karkhanedars of Old Delhi, and Punjabi Muslims, alongside comparative transnational data regarding Pakistani families in both Pakistan and Britain. Rather than seeking to generate new quantitative or demographic estimates, the objective of this synthesis is to map existing ethnographic findings to identify recurring analytical patterns and causal variables.

The comparative analysis proceeds through three distinct stages:

- **Taxonomy of Preferences:** First, the study maps the specific configurations of marriage preferences documented across the selected communities, distinguishing between cross-cousin marriage, parallel-cousin marriage, village/clan exogamy, and *biradari* endogamy.
- **Causal Motivations:** Second, it isolates the underlying socio-economic rationales animating these configurations, focusing specifically on property retention, sibling solidarity, social prestige (*izzat*), and the fulfillment of long-term reciprocal obligations.
- **Deviance and Plurality:** Finally, the paper cross-examines the social meanings attached to practices like elopement and polygyny across these disparate settings, examining how these alternate marital forms are variously justified, tolerated, or socially penalized.

Through this comparative framework, the study demonstrates that marriage customs among Indian Muslims are shaped by a constellation of localized structural factors rather than by a singular, rigid religious template.

Marriage Preferences and Localized Kinship Practices

The most persistent claim in the literature is that Muslims prefer cousin/kin marriage. The structural utility of kin marriage in establishing socio-economic stability is well documented in rural settings where practical

kinship overrides abstract rules. Eglar's (1960) classic ethnography of a Punjabi village in Pakistan remains highly influential because it demonstrates how marriage and kinship are embedded in landholding, reciprocity, and community continuity. In this setting, marriage is not merely an alliance between spouses, but a mechanism for circulating long-term obligations between households – a localized system of *vattan tebhattan* or reciprocal exchange. Where land and household labour are central to survival, marrying within the kin network strengthens property continuity, minimizes the structural uncertainties of external alliances, and preserves familial trust (Eglar, 1960). Kin marriage, therefore, operates as a vital source of social stability and reciprocal support rather than a practice dictated by simple religious adherence.

Further evidence from the region underscores these pragmatic, lineage-defending dimensions. Among the Punjabi Muslims studied by Eglar (1960) and Alavi (1972), kin marriage functions both to avoid exposing familial shortcomings to outsiders and as a marker of high social prestige (*izzat*). Similarly, Misra (1964) notes that among the Muslims of Gujarat, kin marriage is explicitly favoured to retain family wealth within the extended lineage, particularly because daughters take substantial dowries to their husbands' households upon marriage. In Uttar Pradesh, the Kasgar – an endogamous Muslim community – likewise consolidate social and economic resources by contracting marriages strictly within the *biradari* (kin group) (Crook, 1896).

Even in instances where immediate cross cousin or parallel cousin marriages are absent, a generalized preference for kin over non-kin unions remains powerful, demonstrating how communities adapt descent strategies to optimize social security. This is clearly illustrated by the Vohras of Gujarat; as Lambat (1976) observes, a man's primary marital preference encompasses his close cousins – namely his father's sister's daughter (FSD), mother's brother's daughter (MBD), or mother's sister's daughter (MSD) – gradually expanding outward to the daughters of parental cousins and more distant relatives only when the immediate circle yields no eligible partner.

This framework of kinship-mediated stability extends beyond rural South Asia into the migratory context, showing how practical kinship adapts to shifting structural landscapes. Shaw's (2000) study of Pakistani families in Britain demonstrates that kinship obligations (*rishta*) retain their functional vitality even after relocation to a Western, urban setting. Transnational marriage choices continue to be shaped by desires for family continuity, solidarity, and mutual social support. Crucially, migration introduces novel structural pressures, including racial discrimination, educational mobility, and shifting ideas regarding individual partner choice (Shaw, 2000). In this changing environment, kin marriage transcends mere "tradition" to become a vital resource for social security and psychological resilience, helping minority communities maintain cohesion and insulate themselves against external systemic vulnerabilities. Here, alliance and descent merge: the marriage acts as a defensive alliance against a hostile or alien diaspora environment while reinforcing the descent group's transnational network.

However, a strictly economic, structural, or diasporic explanation fails to account for the profound variations and explicit taboos found elsewhere in the Indian ethnographic record. Cousin marriage is far from uniform and, in several communities, is actively discouraged or viewed with social disapproval, subverting standard structural expectations. Among the Gujar Bakarwals, although various forms of cousin marriage do occur and are legally recognized as legitimate unions, they are generally disapproved of at the social level (Khatana, 1976). The Meos present an even starker contrast, explicitly opposing cousin marriage as an incestuous union. Instead, they uphold a highly specific form of preferential marriage encapsulated in the idiom: "the parental aunt with her brother's daughter" (Jamous, 2003). As Jamous (2003) notes, this signifies an arrangement where a woman attempts to bring her brother's daughter into her husband's village – or a girl from her own natal lineage – not necessarily for her own son, but for one of his agnates. This classic alliance strategy bypasses immediate consanguinity to weave wider networks of inter-village solidarity.

The most theoretically striking cases are those in which local residential arrangements completely transform the moral classification of cousins into sibling-like figures, highlighting the explanatory power of Carsten's (2004) "relatedness" over sterile genealogical maps (Khan, 2012). In contexts where brothers occupy adjacent houses and raise their children in close physical proximity, the intense social experience of co-residence, shared food, and daily intimacy creates powerful emotional and moral boundaries. What is genealogically permissible under Islamic jurisprudence (*sharia*) becomes socially and psychologically improper through everyday interaction (*ibid.*). The lived experience of bodily and spatial proximity effectively rewires the category of "cousin" into "sibling", generating an indigenous, localized incest taboo.

Elopement: Contested Agency, Performative Transgression, and Marital Flexibility

While classical sociological models often conceptualize elopement as a radical disruption of normative kinship systems, the South Asian ethnographic record highlights its role as a flexible, alternative pathway to socially recognized marriage. Far from being a mere act of deviance, elopement frequently operates as a negotiated strategy through which actors navigate the tensions between individual agency and communal oversight. Although technically divergent from ortho-praxis Islamic legal frameworks, the prevalence of this practice among diverse

Indian Muslim communities demonstrates how local custom can creatively co-opt, simulate, or circumvent scriptural mandates.

This strategic utility is vividly documented among the Pangals of Manipur, where elopement historically emerged as the most widely practiced marital pattern, despite concerted efforts by community elders to discourage it over the past decade (Khan, 2021). Within this setting, elopement is not always an act of structural rebellion; rather, it can be deeply ritualized and collaborative. As Ahmed (2011) observes, “even if an agreement between the two sides is already there, an elopement is sometimes staged, where the girl’s side will pretend not to accept such conduct or behaviour on the part of the would-be couple.” This performative elopement serves a highly pragmatic purpose: it strategically circumvents the financially prohibitive and socially exhausting rituals that typically precede a formal, fully arranged ceremony. By staging a breakdown of social order, both families are afforded a face-saving mechanism that drastically reduces wedding costs while ultimately achieving the desired alliance.

In contrast, other ethnographic contexts frame elopement through a lens of profound moral friction, where the act carries significant social risk. Among the semi-nomadic Gujar Bakkarwals of Jammu and Kashmir, elopement is heavily stigmatized, culturally frowned upon, and viewed as a severe infraction that brings acute shame (*sharm*) to the woman and her lineage (Khatana, 1976). Yet, despite these rigid normative boundaries, the practice persists. In settings characterized by severe parental rejection or the realization of unsanctioned romantic attachments, elopement provides a high-stakes mechanism for crisis resolution. By physically removing themselves from the domestic sphere and entering into a private union, the couple creates a social *fait accompli*. Once the union becomes physically and socially unavoidable, the subsequent performance of a formal *nikah* (marriage contract) retroactively infuses the relationship with Islamic legal legitimacy. This legal regularisation functions as a powerful lever, easing eventual family reconciliation and mitigating long-term social ostracisation.

Sociologically, the significance of elopement lies in its capacity to mediate between subjective desire and structural control. It rarely seeks to completely subvert or abolish parental authority; rather, it acts as a coercive catalyst for domestic negotiation. While lineages may initially condemn the transgression to protect their public prestige (*izzat*), they routinely opt for pragmatic, *post-facto* acceptance to prevent prolonged inter-household conflict or catastrophic social exposure. Consequently, the moral economy of elopement is highly localized. In communities where rigid patterns of arranged endogamy are fiercely policed, elopement remains a deeply disruptive crisis. Conversely, where localized customs allow for greater marital flexibility, the practice is subtly folded into the broader spectrum of acceptable marital strategies.

Polygyny: Textual Jurisprudence, Normative Friction, and Situational Practice

Polygyny represents another critical domain where the relationship between scriptural law and actual social practice is frequently conflated in public and sociological discourse. While Islamic jurisprudence legally sanctions a man to contract marriages with up to four wives simultaneously, this textual permission has long been erroneously equated with widespread social prevalence. The empirical evidence reviewed across the South Asian ethnographic record robustly challenges this assumption. Instead, it demonstrates that actual polygynous practices are remarkably scarce and highly circumscribed, functioning not as a default religious reflex, but as a contextually specific, socially situated response to immediate household crises or strategic lineage requirements.

Sociologically, the analytical value of the Indian case lies in the stark divergence between legal permissibility and everyday frequency. A legal rule merely establishes an abstract horizon of possibility; it does not dictate social regularity. Where polygyny does manifest, it is almost exclusively tied to concrete, non-religious exigencies. These include addressing primary infertility or childlessness within the initial union, managing the socioeconomic reintegration of a deceased brother’s widow to maintain family continuity, or responding to severe structural deficits in household labour. Rather than serving as an assertion of patriarchal privilege or high social status, polygyny is frequently treated as an exceptional and heavily managed mechanism of domestic risk-mitigation.

This gap between textual allowance and empirical constraint is clearly reflected in specific community case studies. For instance, Lambat (1976) notes that despite Islamic legal provisions, the foundational and normative pattern of marital arrangement among the Sunni Surati Vohras of Gujarat remains strictly monogamous. An even more pronounced systemic resistance is documented among the Meos of Mewat. While the vast majority of Meo marriages are strictly monogamous, those rare individuals who choose to exercise their legal right to a polygynous union face severe communal policing and normative friction (Shamsh, 1983). Far from being celebrated or normalised under a pan-Islamic identity, polygynous individuals are subjected to intense social criticism, and in acute instances of custom defiance, they risk outright expulsion from their localized *gotra* (clan group) (*ibid.*). This severe penalty highlights how pre-Islamic tribal structures and localised moral values actively override and discipline the choices permitted by religious texts.

Furthermore, comparative regional data underscores that localized material conditions often supersede religious boundaries entirely. Among the Pangals of Manipur, Ahmed (2011) demonstrates that the practice of

polygyny is exceedingly rare. Crucially, Ahmed's comparative analysis reveals that the statistical incidence of polygyny among the Pangals and their neighbouring non-Muslim peers, the Meiteis (Manipuri Hindus), is practically identical. This empirical parity persists despite the contrasting religious sanctions and distinct cultural leanings of the two groups. Such findings powerfully illustrate that macro-level variables – such as regional economic stability, agrarian land distribution, and localized gender ratios – exert a far more deterministic influence on marital configurations than abstract scriptural rules.

Ultimately, polygyny cannot be understood as a defining or essentialised Muslim trait. While the law permits, the immediate community continuously disciplines, constrains, and penalizes. Marital configurations among Indian Muslims are dynamically shaped by an ongoing negotiation between legal textuality and everyday domestic reality. By shifting the analytical focus from scriptural possibilities to the lived strategies of the household, it becomes evident that monogamy remains the overwhelming social expectation, while polygyny functions merely as a rare, highly scrutinized, and socially costly institutional safety valve.

III. Conclusion

This article has shown that marriage preference among Indian Muslims is diverse and locally constructed. Cousin marriage is neither universally preferred nor uniformly rejected. Elopement is neither purely deviant nor fully accepted. Polygyny is legally allowed but socially restricted. Across all three domains, the evidence points to the importance of kinship structure, household residence, community norms, and local cultural adaptation. The main sociological lesson is that Muslim marriage in India cannot be reduced to a single religious model. Islamic law provides a legal framework, but lived social relations shape actual marriage practice. Communities differ in how they define kinship, how they organize households, how they manage honour, and how they respond to social change. These differences produce distinct marital patterns even within the same religious tradition. A more adequate account of marriage among Indian Muslims therefore requires comparison across communities and attention to historical context. It must also distinguish between what is permitted, what is preferred, and what is actually practiced. That distinction reveals the richness and complexity of family life in India's Muslim communities.

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