

Business

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Click, meet and marry

Online matchmaking businesses in India have many ways to woo

Only a tenth of people seeking a spouse use the internet, but that is set to rise



Anandita Kumar

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“IT WAS 2012...I was number 37,” says Ashwini, referring to the badge that was pinned on her shirt pocket. Her task was to go onto the stage and introduce herself to around 70 eligible bachelors and their parents.

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Families then conferred and, provided caste and religious background proved no obstacle, would approach the event's moderator asking to meet number 37. At midday girls would wait for prospects to swing by, again with parents on either side. A brief exchange might establish the potential bride's cooking skills or her intention to work after marriage. If

the two sides hit it off, they would exchange copies of their horoscopes. Nearly 50 men lined up to meet Ashwini that day, speed-dating style. No one made the cut. She later married a colleague.

Such gatherings form an important part of the wedding industry, worth around \$50bn a year, in a country where arranged marriages continue to be the norm. India has 440m millennials—roughly, the generation born between 1980 and 1996—and a further 390m youngsters have been born since 2000, so there are plenty of anguished parents for marriage facilitators to pitch to. KPMG, a consultancy, estimates that out of 107m single men and women, 63m are “active seekers”. For now, only a tenth surf the internet to find a spouse. But the number who do is about to explode, argue executives in the marriage-portal business (India has 2,600 such sites). “After Facebook [took off], people are more open about their lives than ever before, which has had a great knock-on effect,” says Gourav Rakshit of Shaadi.com, one of India's oldest matrimonial sites.

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Take Matrimony.com, the country's biggest online matchmaker, which

raised \$78m in its initial public offering on September 13th. Its shares began trading this week. It runs 300-odd websites in 15 languages, catering to different castes and religions. It has sites for divorcees, the disabled, the affluent (“Elite Matrimony”) and for those with unfavourable astrological charts, which make it difficult to find a match.

All online firms run a “freemium” model: upload your profile at no charge and let an algorithm match horoscope details with potential partners filtered by age, caste, education, income and sometimes (alas) complexion. Or you can pay for features like instant chat or a colourful border around your profile to ensure the algorithm returns you as a top search result.

Such a long list of options means that finding a match on the web can be time-consuming and tedious. “It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack,” says one suitor. Predictably, many also complain that online profiles often do not reflect reality. Outright fakes remain a scourge. This month a man was arrested in Delhi for extorting over 5m rupees (\$77,700) from 15 women by luring them on matrimonial websites. And no amount of artificial intelligence can yet identify what will make two youngsters click.


Spouseup, a south Indian startup, is undaunted. It trawls social media to determine a candidate’s personality and recommends matches by calculating a “compatibility score”. Nine-tenths of its 50,000 users are non-resident Indians who usually fly to India for a month or so, scout for partners, settle on one, get hitched and fly back together. For these time-starved travellers, the machine-led scouring “provides an insight that would come from five coffee dates,” says Karthik Iyer, the firm’s founder. Banihal, which is based in Silicon Valley, relies on a long psychometric questionnaire of around 100 questions to match like-minded partners.


Real-world complements to online efforts can help secure a match. Some services, such as IITIMShaadi.com, aimed at people graduating from prestigious universities, also act as conventional wedding-brokers, by meeting prospects on their clients' behalf. The job is no different from that of a headhunter, says Taksh Gupta, its founder. He charges anywhere between 50,000 and 200,000 rupees for the service. His most recent catch, after a search lasting over two years, was a husband for a 45-year-old woman from a prestigious university who would settle for no less than an Ivy League groom. Matrimony.com, too, has over 400 "relationship managers" and 140 physical outlets.

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"The opportunity is huge", enthuses Murugavel Janakiraman, boss of Matrimony.com. Around four-fifths of new customers now come via smartphones, lured by instant alerts about new potential matches and services that match up people in the same town. But the spread of smartphones also brings competition. Casual-dating apps are spreading fast. Tinder, on which decisions about eligibility rarely benefit from parental advice, now counts India as Asia's largest, fastest-growing market.

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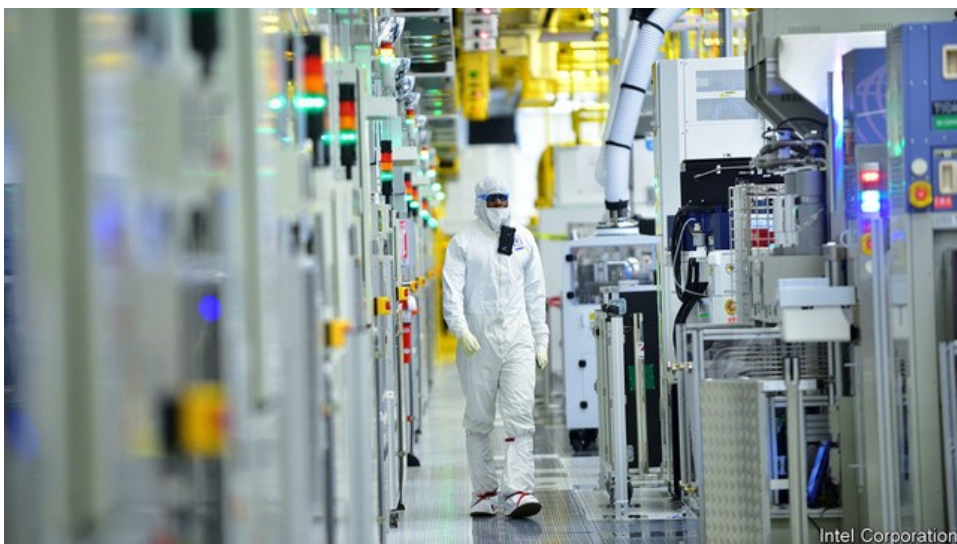
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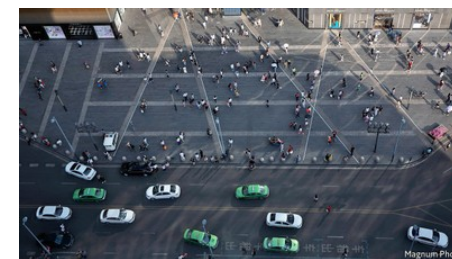
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