

Why a Canadian diplomat was wrong about Indian students and ‘marriages of convenience’

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OPINION

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In today’s polarized public sphere, nuance is often cast aside in conversations surrounding immigration. It is a stretch too far to expect subtlety or subject matter expertise on social media and in the corners of the internet. And it is for that reason that nuance has never been more important in official dialogues and diplomatic channels.

A Canadian diplomat’s concern that students from India were entering “marriages of convenience” to offset the financial cost of studying abroad leads us to worry that nuance is disappearing even from the corridors of power.

A recent report in The Globe and Mail revealed that Han Duan, the first secretary (migration) at Canada’s High Commission to India in New Delhi, flagged a potential abuse of Canada’s spousal work permit by Indian undergraduate students. In a 2025

e-mail report, she said that students were entering marriages of convenience to help pay for their education and the increasing cost of living. This practice, Ms. Han said, was “widely advertised in Indian newspapers and on dating apps.” Ms. Han also asserted that study permit applications from India declined following the introduction of restrictions on spousal open work permits in 2024.

Instances of fraudulent letters of acceptance and the concerning trend of organized crime groups exploiting the student visa program have given the Canadian government plenty of reason to be wary of student applications from India. However, the concerns raised by Ms. Han are misplaced.

The advertisements that Ms. Han refers to are indeed quite common. It is symptomatic of a practice that has existed in South Asia for millennia and has been publicized in various media for nearly a century.

The truth is, in India, most marriages are “of convenience.” But crucially, they are not of the fraudulent variety. Marriages are, more often than not, a means of preserving social or economic status – or elevating it. Indian society is largely endogamous, and the vast majority of Indians still enter matrimony through arranged marriages.

And so, when these advertisements are placed in newspapers or on dating apps, it is not

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because students abroad or their families are seeking ways to pay tuition. It is because NRIs – non-resident Indians living abroad – are seen as a way to fulfill the dual desires of upward mobility and moving to the West.

These advertisements come with a myriad of issues – casteism, sexism, colourism and classism, to name a few. But the potential for visa fraud is minimal. This is not to say that this practice, of arranged marriages being largely transactional, isn’t flawed. It is, in fact, built on a system that perpetuates social inequity premised on caste and class. Analysis has shown that while people may seek partners who are based in the West, the key criteria for marriage are caste, region, class and so on. Once those are met, the rest is a bonus. Living in the West, to put it bluntly, can strengthen marital negotiations,

but rarely initiates them.

Further, arranged marriages involving NRIs, while perhaps growing out of aspirations for upward mobility or the pursuit of “a better life in the West,” are, by and large, genuine.

There could be a few bad apples who exploit spousal immigration programs. But most people entering such marriages are not doing so with the intention of getting a divorce after they emigrate; rather, the institution itself is embedded in a broader social framework that values permanence.

There is, of course, an argument to be made that marriages – arranged or otherwise – last because divorce remains stigmatized in India and many women lack agency. These factors explain the country’s relatively low divorce rates. Many Indians also grow up with the idea that marriages serve practical or familial purposes, with personal compatibility an afterthought. But these caveats do not make arranged marriages any less genuine at the outset.

The system is flawed. Arranged marriage is a deeply contested issue, and it is shaped by social hierarchies, family pressures and unequal power dynamics. It is also transactional, with exchanges involving gold, property or other forms of wealth. These characteristics remain central features of matrimony in India, regardless of migration. They cannot be reduced – incorrectly – to a sham

that serves the goal of emigrating.

Ms. Han’s implied argument that stricter rules for spousal work permits led to fewer Indian students in Canada also falls apart at closer inspection. In the same period, the federal government introduced several measures to cut the number of international students. Between January, 2024, and September, 2025, the number of study permit holders dropped from more than one million to about 725,000. For 2026, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada outlined reducing that number to a little over 650,000. As Syed Hussan, executive director at Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, pointed out to The Globe, unpredictable immigration policies act as a deterrent. This further suggests that correlation isn’t causation.

We are writing this as recent immigrants to Canada who spent our formative years in India. Canada has opened its doors to new talent from across the world and refugees whose lives have been snatched from them. For people emigrating from the Global South, Canada comes with the promise of a better life and a more equal society. Perhaps, in that same spirit of equality, Canadian diplomats should do more to simply understand the social structures and practices in these countries. Some of them may be deeply flawed, but painting them as disingenuous without locating their context is a disservice.