

Extracts from
A Bengali Woman in England (Englondey Bangamahila)*

Chapter 12: English Marriage and Domestic Life

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In England, nobody—man or woman—marries against his or her wishes; nor do parents in this country sow thorns in the path of their children by forcing them into marriage. The marriageable age for women in this country is between twenty and thirty, and for men, twenty-five and thirty-five. But people often wait longer before they get married, and men, in particular, do not enter the portals of domestic life until they have attained a certain degree of financial stability. Irrespective of whether one is rich or poor, one does not settle down until one is earning enough to take care of one's family. People in our country are already parents, and sometimes even grandparents, at the age Englishmen and women get married. This system of early marriage, coupled with the unhealthy climate, makes people age much faster in India, and they become old even when they are young in age; but here, it is at this age that youth truly begins to blossom and people encounter their first taste of the joys and sorrows of domestic life.

Unlike in our country, there are no professional matchmakers to fix up marriages here in England; young men and women find their partners themselves. The period during which one makes up one's mind on his or her partner is called the period of 'courtship'. Young people meet at some public place, on some occasion, at some friend's or relative's house; a young man and a young woman might get to know each other during the course of a few such get-togethers. This sometimes leads to a man developing a weakness for a woman. This is how an English romance first sparks into life. The man expresses his feelings for the woman either by telling her about it or by writing her a letter; the woman,

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too, if she reciprocates his emotions, does not hesitate to tell him so. Once the two have expressed their feelings for each other, the young man and the young woman meet freely in public and go around and try to spend as much time together and understand each other as much as possible. Several months go by in this fashion; then, if there are no differences and both of them like each other, the man proposes marriage to the woman. If the woman agrees to the proposal, the two, without bothering to wait for their parents' consent, decide to get married. Nowhere else in Europe do young men and women presume to broach the topic of marriage before taking prior consent of their parents.

Once an Englishman and an Englishwoman have decided to marry, they then inform their parents; the parents mostly do not raise any objections to their children's decision to marry but rather endorse the decision enthusiastically. The children decide to marry only after attaining a mature age and after considerable scouting around and weighing the pros and cons; so why shouldn't the parents endorse their decision? Once the parents, too, have agreed to the match, the young man and the young woman pledge to marry each other. This is something like the custom of *patra*¹ before marriage in our country. After this pledge, the two are obliged under law to marry each other. This practice of getting pledged to each other is called an 'engagement' in English, and after this pledge, the young man and the young woman each sports a ring; this ring is called an 'engagement' ring. Even though young men and women in this country exercise their freedom and choose their partners themselves without any pressure from anybody else, promises of marriage being reneged upon is not unheard of. If a man, after pledging to marry a woman, refuses to do so, the woman can charge him with having gone back on his word, and if she wins the case, have a heavy fine imposed on him.

Once the engagement has taken place, the two behave as husband- and wife-to-be; they stroll around, go to church and go to the theatre together, etcetera. This is called the *courtship* period; it can last anywhere between six months and six years. I have already explained that the English do not jump into marriage until they find everything satisfactory—that is why some people wait a long time even after fixing up their marriage because of financial constraints or sometimes because of other reasons. It is only when

they are satisfied about all the aspects that they decide on the wedding date and prepare to step into the realm of domesticity. The English, too, have utmost respect for the bond of matrimony and consider it one of the most sacred human relationships. Adultery is not tolerated among these people; and even men here consider adultery a terrible sin.

The day of the wedding is a day of great joy and celebration in countries all over the world. The joy of the family and the children of the house know no bounds. Here, it is the bride and the groom who enjoy themselves the most because men and women are not married off as children as they are in India's Bengal; they know each other here, and so there is no room for any anxiety or fear in their minds. In this country, the marriage ceremony takes place not in the house of the bride, but at church in the morning. The rich decorate the church and their house with flowers, garlands and bouquets to celebrate the wedding. Flowers are appreciated in every country of the world and they are used to decorate the house and surroundings at the time of weddings because they are natural and sacred ornaments. The *barjatra*² tradition of our country is absent here, but the wealthy turn up at church in fashionable cars. Instead of the red *cheli*³ cloth of our country, the bride wears sparkling white new clothes and the groom, too, comes decked in new and stylish attire. Both wear white gloves and carry flower bouquets; the bride also has a white net over her face. Just as we have the tradition of dressing up children as *nitbar*⁴ and *nitkonya*⁵ in our country, here too, the groom's younger brother or some other close relative plays the role of the *nitbar*, and the bride's younger sister or cousin plays the role of the *nitkonya*. The *nitbar* is called the 'best man', and the *nitkonya*, the 'bridesmaid', in this country. The groom has only one *nitbar*, but the number of *nitkonyas* of the bride can vary between one and twelve, depending on her means. Like the bride and bridegroom, they, too, put on new and beautiful clothes; all the *nitkonyas* wear white nets and white gloves and carry bouquets as it is considered auspicious to do so.

Once everybody has arrived at the church, the bride and groom stand near the altar at the time designated for the wedding and promise in the presence of the priest, relatives and friends that they accept each other as husband and wife, and that they will not part as long as they are alive, etcetera etcetera. Then the two pray to God Almighty and ask for his

blessings. The priest reads out a few passages from the *Bible*, offers advice to the newly wed couple and prays to the munificent God Almighty for their well-being; the parents and the others present on the occasion also join in the prayers. As in India, here too, the bride's father, uncle or elder brother hands her over to the groom. After the wedding vows and prayers are over, the bride and the groom go into another room with the priest and a few elders and sign in the marriage registry; a few others also sign on the registry as witnesses to the marriage. Just as the relationship between the husband and wife is deemed sacred and binding by religion after the wedding vows made at the altar, so too is their relationship after the registration in the eyes of the law. Once the wedding is over, it is the custom here for the guests to scatter rice all around the newly married couple and on their heads as they leave the church and also to strike the groom with a shoe. This practice is similar to our tradition of wringing the groom's ears, but people sometimes use so much force in Bengal that the young child grooms often start crying. In this country, they strike the groom with a soft velvet shoe making it an enjoyable experience for him rather than a traumatic one. Most people go to the groom's house or the bride's father's house from the church and have a grand feast and indulge in revelry and celebrations with friends and relatives.

A plain gold ring is the symbol of marriage in this country in much the same way as the iron bangle is in ours. Now, the engagement ring is taken off and the wedding ring is put on in its place. The act of taking off one's wedding ring is considered inauspicious by old and superstitious women in this country. And the wedding ring is a very useful thing, too; one look at a woman's hands and you know if she is married or single. A few superstitions are discernible in the wedding rites of this country as well; they are to be found only among less educated and uneducated women. The father of the bride in this country, unlike in India or France or other countries, does not have to provide loads of jewellery, clothes or money at the time of the wedding; if someone wishes, he can, of course, gift his daughter cash or valuables, but it is not the custom here. It is the practice here for parents and friends to gift the newly married couple various things, watches, chains, books, clothes and so on and so forth for their marriage in much the same way as we give presents in our country.

The newly wed couple travels to some secluded place and spends a couple of weeks there all by themselves, enjoying each other's company. This period immediately following the marriage is called 'honeymoon' in English; the honeymoon generally lasts a month or so. Perhaps they use such a sweet name for it because this period right after marriage is the happiest time of one's life. The new couple is yet to encounter the problems of everyday life, the tantrums of their children, the petulance of servants and all the other irritants that come with the baggage; they still believe married life has only happiness to offer. Some couples spend up to two or three months in this manner, enjoying each other's intimacy. They are not perturbed by any worries of everyday married life. Then they return home and start living together as husband and wife.

Single women are called 'Miss' in this country, and married women, 'mistress' or 'mrs' in short. Many people have the impression that Englishwomen change their names after marriage; that is not true. Children are named here at the time of their christening in much the same way as we are named during the *annaprasan*, or the ceremony that marks the first formal feeding of rice to the child; parents name their children according to their own whims and tastes. That name is called one's Christian name; it does not change. It is only the father's name that a girl carries that changes with her marriage. Just as a Kumari Nirmala Dutta, if she marries a man who has 'Mitra' as his surname, becomes Srimati Nirmala Mitra, so does a Miss Rose Smith become Mrs Rose Allan if she marries an Allan. In England, men and women are free to marry their cousins; people here have no problems to marrying within one's own family in this way. But the strange thing is that one cannot marry one's wife's sister even after one becomes a widower. It is true that many people have been trying to challenge this stricture but no one has been successful so far.

Neither men nor women in this country live with their parents after they marry. Husband and wife move into a separate house and establish their own home. It would not be unfair to say that domestic life in this country is totally different from what it is in our country. The two spend all their time together except when the husband is at work; they eat

together, take walks together, look after the house and family together and even discuss the world at large. Why do people marry? “To find one person in the world who will share equally in all one’s joys and sorrows, to work shoulder to shoulder in discharging one’s responsibilities,” everyone from all corners of the world will answer in a chorus. I have no doubt in my mind that the wives in this country truly share in their husbands’ joys and sorrows and work side by side with their husbands in discharging their responsibilities and obligations. Husband and wife partake equally of each other’s joys and sorrows and worship together and wives often actively help their husbands. In many cases, the wife works and feeds her husband and children where the husband is unable to do so.

English domestic life does indeed appear very happy and beautiful to us. Husband and wife share equally of happiness and misfortune. Husbands in this country never go on holidays or pleasure jaunts leaving their wives behind. They are not content with having earned enough money to meet their own needs; they also try to make their wives happy as far as possible. Husband and wife visit the church together almost every Sunday, pray and read the scriptures and sing religious hymns together. The clever and far-sighted husbands of this land consult their wives and ask for their suggestions before taking any decision; intelligent wives, too, try their utmost to make their beloved husbands happy not by treating them as their masters but by showering them with spontaneous affection unmarred by artifice. It is because Englishmen find happiness in the arms of their educated wives at home that they are not seduced by pleasures the world outside may have to offer. In a nutshell, the English wife is her husband’s right hand; they often help their husbands take the right decision with their advice and their husbands, too, accept their advice with respect and love.

A terrible despair floods the mind when one realizes how hard things are for a couple in our country. The wife, cooped up in the house, has no idea how the husband spends his day; neither does the husband have any inkling of what the wife does all day. The women of the house are even afraid of their husbands’ shadows. The husbands sit in beautifully furnished drawing rooms and puff on their hookahs and play cards or while their time

away chatting with their friends and hangers-on or going out with them. But the wives, caged within the four walls of the house, have only the household chores to keep them busy. The wife loves the husband; she is forever engaged in finding ways of making life more comfortable for him and serving him the most delicious dishes; but the husband does not treat her properly and she, too, either cannot or does not know how to behave naturally with him. Very few people in our country appreciate the true nature of the relationship between husband and wife. And we cannot really blame the couple entirely—superstitions, the evil traditions of our country, child marriage and the inexcusable behaviour of parents towards their children are behind this problem. Even though Indian women are unwavering in their fidelity to their husbands, couples fail to relish true intimacy due to all these reasons.

Again, even though many married men and women in England do truly love each other and people marry only after knowing each other for a long time, cases of wives or husbands leaving one another are more common here than in other countries. If a husband mistreats his wife or is unfaithful to her, she is at complete liberty to go to court and lodge a complaint against him and get separated; a man can likewise leave his wife if she sullies her character. And after they are separated, both are free to re-marry. It is possible to abandon one's wife in our country, but a woman lodging a case to leave her husband is unheard of. Even if her husband has a hundred flaws, even if he is unfaithful to her, the faithful Hindu woman will bear everything silently and considers the idea of taking her husband to court very shameful and disgusting. In this country, both men and women consider marital infidelity to be a dreadful crime and a terrible sin. The husband cannot do anything he wants to and get away with it here.

I had had the impression that the English harboured very little love or emotion for their children. Though the family does not live together as a unit here and the people only have a formal politeness to offer to foreigners, I no longer believe that they feel no love for their parents, children or other relatives. English parents take adequate care of their children until they are old enough to look after themselves and start a family of their own and try to give them the space to live independent lives as far as possible. In this, English

parents display greater affection for their children than do parents in our country, I think. On growing up, boys and girls set up their own homes rather than stay on as a burden to their parents; it is true that this reduces the degree of intimacy between them but it does not necessarily erase the love and the bond between the two. They meet up, share a meal and spend time together whenever they feel like it. Domestic quarrels are not as common as they are in our country; therefore, parents and children and brothers and sisters manage to maintain a modicum of camaraderie towards each other all through life. Hindus seem to harbour a surfeit of parental love for their children, sometimes to the point of overindulgence, but parents there often do not discharge their responsibilities towards their children and the violent domestic quarrels leading to family breakups that are heard of there are almost unknown here.

When their children grow up, English parents treat them as friends and do not label them 'disobedient' when they refuse to follow their suggestions as parents in our country are wont to do; not only does this spare their children a lifetime of agony, but it also saves themselves unnecessary pain. They understand that children develop the power of distinguishing between right and wrong as they step from adolescence into youth and therefore do not necessarily agree with whatever they say as they used to when they were kids; therefore they ask their grown-up children to take whatever decision they feel is right for them. Parents do not consider it below their dignity to seek advice from their worthy children; on the contrary, their actions are often influenced by their children's suggestions. Children, too, instead of quaking in fear of authoritarian parents or feeling disgust for them thinking them to be heartless or uneducated, behave properly with them and treat them with appropriate respect. If parents do something wrong and a son or a daughter tries to correct them, they judge his or her statement on its merits and act accordingly rather than ending up blind with fury. Who would not agree that English domestic life is a happy one after seeing this kind of behaviour on the part of both parents and children?

The relationship between siblings in this country is very different from what it is in our country. Brothers and sisters are brought up together and as equals. Boys are not taught to

look down upon their sisters because they are girls or for any other reason. Their camaraderie only increases as they grow older. Parents give sons and daughters equal access to education and do not treat them differently, discriminating between the son, who is the heir to their property and who would earn, and the daughter, who would be handed over to another family. That is why brother and sister care for each other right from childhood and continue to discuss things, read books, play and travel together, whatever be their age. Differences and disputes between brother and sister are almost non-existent in this country. It is not as if siblings love each other only as long as they are yet to set up a family; they harbour the same affection for each other even after they marry. True, they get caught up in the demands of their own family lives, but they meet whenever they get the opportunity and they greet each other with utmost affection and love and give vent to the sentiments and tender emotions they harbour.

In England, only the eldest son inherits the father's property. As long as he is alive, the father can gift his other children some of his wealth or property, but when he dies, nobody except his eldest son has any right to his estate. The privileged position enjoyed by the eldest son in this country has both its positive and negative repercussions. It seems a great wrong and gross injustice that only the eldest son should inherit everything and the other sons should get nothing at all. It is very difficult for the other sons to digest the fact that the eldest son, even if he is illiterate and a good-for-nothing, is to inherit the entire estate solely because he has had the good fortune of being born first. If the father suddenly dies, his other children become penniless and helpless. Sometimes, you have the eldest son happily enjoying the property inherited from his father while his brothers roam around, starving and destitute. The positive side is that since the eldest son is the legal heir, the other sons do not rush to court with the intention of harvesting as much as possible from the estate, nor do they entertain any false hopes of acquiring the estate. Discord, disagreement and violence do not figure as perennial threats waiting to gobble up fraternal love in English family life. The younger sons try to earn their living from a very young age. They understand that even if they have been born to rich families, they will have to run their households with their own earnings; therefore, they learn to be independent and to fend for themselves. Because of this arrangement, large estates

continue to flourish. Not more than one son can afford to while his time away; the others try to work hard and earn money. In our country, on the other hand, almost every son born to a rich father turns out to be lazy and all of them fight for the estate in court and thereby waste their inheritance.

But it is this very system that makes people selfish here. Everybody wants to live independently; every son craves not just freedom when he grows into adulthood but also a separate house of his own. Instead of living together in a joint family, everybody wants to live separately with his wife, children and servants. The English are often seen to be concerned only about themselves and their immediate families; they betray little enthusiasm for social relations with other relatives. This often assumes the form of gross insensitivity among some people here. Fathers thus remain indifferent even as their sons are reduced to dire straits; these people think it to be no business of theirs when even their close relatives are in serious trouble, forget about worrying for others.

Be that as it may, the English lifestyle as practiced among genteel society is quite admirable. The whole family eats together; everybody from the little child to the head of the family gathers at the same table at mealtime. Before eating, the head of the family stands near the table and prays to the Almighty and the other members of the family listen attentively. This prayer is called 'grace'. The objective of this prayer is to thank the Almighty for providing them with food and to ask for his blessings. The whole family has fun and has a nice chat together. Since men and women eat together right from their childhood, they quickly pick up manners and etiquette. They treat their maids and servants as they would treat their own children and take care of their emotional and physical needs; likewise, they too, honour and respect their masters.

In this country it is normal practice for rich men to employ seven or eight in their households—a cook, a maid for the kitchen, two or three maids for the household, a personal maid for the mistress for the house, a coachman and a *khansama*.⁶ Some households can have fifteen or even eighteen maids and servants. The chief of the servants working in a rich man's house is called a 'butler'. He is responsible for

supervising all the work in the house and is entrusted with the keys and is in charge of the cellar. He is the one who has to take the blame if anything goes in missing. The personal maid of the mistress bosses over all the other maids in the house; she is responsible for the storeroom and other household items. Most families employ only women as domestic help. Only the rich can employ menservants. A manservant commands thrice the salary that a maid servant does in this country. Besides, one also has to pay a special *tax* if one wishes to employ a manservant. People who work as cooks, maids and other domestic help in this country are almost always single and young—they are usually between twelve and thirty five. They are paid between eight and twenty or twenty five rupees a month, and menservants generally draw between twenty five and fifty or sixty rupees a month as salary.

The class of people who, in our country, can employ seven or eight servants in their households can only afford two or three maidservants in this country. Maidservants in this country have to do a lot of work; and they are expected to do a myriad variety of work. They clean the entire house, dust all the furniture, make the beds, water the plants, polish the shoes, do the shopping, double as durwans and so on. An English maidservant takes on the workload of three of her Indian counterparts—she has no chance to rest from seven in the morning to ten or eleven at night. Like all the others in this country, servants and maids, too, are never seen to shirk their responsibilities. They do not have to be constantly prodded to do their work; once their responsibilities have been explained to them, the mistress of the house can sit back and relax. These people consider rebuke to be a matter of great shame; so, they perform their duties punctually and effectively before anyone can say anything. Of course, there may be exceptions, but most English maids and servants are very efficient, hard working, intelligent and trustworthy. Their only fault is that they enjoy their independence; they are not happy with the idea of being directed by others as servants in other countries are used to, and are known to go around dressed as smartly as their employers once their work gets over.

In many families, servants are counted as family members during religious discussions. Every Sunday, the master of the house prays together with his wife, children, friends and

servants. The family and the guests sit together and read the scriptures aloud and pray together, with the master of the house doubling as the *acharya*.⁷ One cannot but be struck by the intensity of religious sentiments one sees in the English people on such occasions. Each person kneels down or bows his or her head at such sessions; all the people assembled sit facing the wall. Finally, the master of the house reads out a series of passages from the *Bible* and the other worshippers respond in a chant. Once the worship is over, the servants leave one by one, slowly and gracefully, and the family can talk freely among themselves.

When one considers all these things, one realizes that while individual self-interest may be part and parcel of English domestic life, it is in many ways better and more satisfying than that of other races. While the English may not display much concern for society at large, their domestic life is extremely satisfying and pleasurable. They do not care much for hollow pomp and show; their own comfort is their main priority and the English understand that very well. A house of one's own and a lot of money is all they need to live happily and comfortably. A pretty house that matches one's tastes, well-appointed and clean—with all the doors and windows shut—a romantic conversation with a pleasant, beautifully made-up, devoted wife sitting in front of a fire blazing in the fireplace—the contented smile on the crimson-tinged faces of properly brought up and neat and clean children—lots of furniture adorning the house—an easy harmony between essential and plush furnishings—every object in the house laid out beautifully—these are things that denizens of this cold and bleak land count among sources of the greatest happiness and comfort. However wealthy an Englishman might be, he would never pollute his house with acts of debauchery or other terrible practices. The fact that one's house is a sacred place is deeply rooted in the minds of every English gentleman; and the secret of this happy and satisfying English domestic life lies in the efforts of the English to keep their family lives blemishless and pleasurable.

Notes and Glossary

- 1 The *patra* is a written agreement between a boy's family and a girl's family fixing the date of the wedding between the two.
- 2 In the traditional Hindu wedding, the groom arrives at the bride's father's place, which is where the wedding takes place, in a procession, accompanied by his relatives, friends and other invitees from his side. This is called the *barjatra*.
- 3 *Cheli* is a piece of silk cloth that is used to cover the head of a bride during a Hindu wedding ceremony.
- 4 *Nitbar* refers to a young boy from the groom's party who is dressed up as a little groom and who accompanies the groom to the wedding ceremony.
- 5 *Nitkonya* refers to a young girl from the bride's side who is dressed up as a little bride at the time of a wedding.
- 6 A *khansama* is a servant who attends the table during meals.
- 7 An *acharya* refers to one who is well-versed in the scriptures and leads the discussions at a religious session.