

Match-fixing...?

Investigators can blackmail wannabe brides or groom.

BY ANNAM SURESH

Kolkata

The barber and the priest, who were the unofficial matchmakers in the days of yore, have now been replaced by matrimonial agencies. The nosy neighbour and the local vegetable vendor don't give you the low-down on the boy's family or the girl's character anymore. Enter the era of private detective agencies that have mushroomed all over Kolkata and have successfully replaced the informers.

Is he/she an alcoholic or a drug addict? Is he hiding a previous marriage? Is he or his family given to violence? Are they in big debt? Do they have a criminal background? What is the medical history? Are they given to a promiscuous lifestyle? Are the claims of education, income and assets true? These are questions that cause endless anxiety to parents.

According to R. R. Banerjee, head of Super Detective Services, pre-marital investigations have increased dramatically over recent years, constituting over 40 per cent of their business. In fact, several small agencies, mostly started by retired cops, thrive almost entirely on such investigations. Compared to investigations on workplace pilferage, extra-marital affairs, extortion, kidnapping, election malpractices, business competition or industrial security, pre-marital probe requires almost no investment.

Many investigative agencies employ freelancers of both sexes and socio-economic groups on a case-by-case basis, depending on the socio-economic profile of the person to be investigated. There are at least 1,500 freelancers operating in Kolkata alone.

R. J. Gupta, who heads the eastern wing of SekretI, uses freelancers with great discretion. "For many agencies it is cheaper to use a freelancer than engage full-time employees and invest in training, competitive salaries and allowances. While many freelancers deliver quality work since they want

BIGGEST CATCH FROM THE NET

Most requests for a pre-marital investigation come in the case of alliances fixed through online matrimonial agencies. The boom in internet matchmaking has proved a boon for the agencies.

Going by industry sources, the online matrimonial market, worth over Rs. 500 million, boasts of 60 million Indian users alone.

Santosh Shekhawat, who used the services of a detective agency when negotiating the marriage of his daughters, attributes this trend to the growing dependence on online matrimonial agencies. Any candidate here, who seems too good to be true, seems to call for investigation. In the case of his younger daughter, the boy was found to be a drug addict who had been thrown out of several jobs, had been disowned by his family as an embarrassment. The profile listed a master's degree in engineering, a multinational employer, an annual income of \$165,000, a house and a family of professionals. Only the education and family details were true.

"Although the investigation cost us about Rs 75,000 since the boy had moved to Australia, it was a small price to pay for my daughter's happiness", says Shekhawat.



to be in business, to all this, there is a flipside, though very rare, where the investigators themselves indulged in blackmailing a suspect when

incriminating evidence was found, thus embarrassing the organisation."

S. J. Mukhtar, a retired policeman, however, prefers to use freelancers. "Most of the people who work for me are my own relatives and friends, so I have never faced such a situation. And, since matrimonial cases are very sensitive, I have to be very choosy."

According to him, it is no longer sufficient to match horoscopes, or have the boy and girl meet once in the presence of elders before finalizing an alliance. Even when the two have been dating for a couple of years, there have been instances where an investigation has thrown up some disturbing surprises such as a wife and kids in another town, a hidden divorce, criminal records or financial instability.

According to Sunderi Sabherwal who works as a freelance detective for several agencies, at least 4 out of ten pre-marital investigations throw up discrepancies and at least two are serious enough for the families to call off the marriage.

In a recent case, where Sundari had investigated a case, everything seemed fine, prima facie, except that the groom's three younger siblings and four younger cousins were all married, while he was still single, no history of a girlfriend or hidden marriage.

Deeper probing revealed that he was gay and that the usual Indian story of keeping up the family name was being played to get him married. She points out that, since many youngsters go abroad or to another city for studies or work these days, the extended family hardly knows them – particularly nothing regarding their friends, lifestyle and of course their sexual orientation.

This is where private detectives step in. Such investigations can cost anything from Rs. 7,000 to Rs. 100,000. But most people, who have invested such money, agree that it was worth the expense, even if nothing incriminating came out of the probe.

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