



## LOVE AS ENJOYMENT: Hopelessness, Play, and Desirable Futures in Ghaziabad, India

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The most dangerous thing of all is the death of our desires.

—Pash (1950–88), Punjabi poet

In Ghaziabad, a city of 3.4 million inhabitants on the eastern edge of Delhi in the state of Uttar Pradesh, Jyoti and I were sitting under the shade of a tree outside a degree college, where she was studying for a master's in Sociology. We met regularly in 2015 and 2016 when I was conducting ethnographic research on how education changes women's ideas of love, marriage, and desirable futures. Jyoti and I first met in the Girls' Common Room of her college when I was waiting to meet with the college principal.

That day, Jyoti was laughing coquettishly into the phone and cajoling the policeman she was speaking to top up her phone. I was sitting beside her completing my notes, trying *not* to listen to her seemingly private conversation. After only a couple of minutes, Jyoti hung up and chided me for my lack of interest in her conversation. She seemed annoyed by my distance. "You have ruined your life [*barbaad*] by doing this PhD!" she said somewhat angrily. "You should at least be interested in speaking to them," she implored. Assuming that she was suggesting

a flirtatious engagement with the policeman, I protested and explained that I already had a boyfriend, and that I felt committed to him. “So what,” she rebutted; “he is there [abroad], you are here.” Even if I had a boyfriend, she said, I should *enjoy* like she did (using the English word in a Hindi sentence). “One should *enjoy* with many people,” she repeatedly advised me.

Over the next few months, Jyoti tried to set me up with her cousins and classmates, encouraging me to have fun with her. She repeatedly reminded me that her sister-in-law had told her that going out with one’s husband after marriage can get boring after a while (*shaadi ke baad tu ek hi admi ke saath sara time jaan-aana padta hain*), so, she advised Jyoti, who in turn advised me, to *enjoy* while in college (i.e., before marriage and still able to). However, I had yet to learn that enjoyment meant cultivating erotic desire in casual encounters without assuming that it would lead to sex, love, or marriage. Jyoti was an excellent guide to enjoyment and repeatedly asked me if she could give my number to her cousins. While I repeatedly declined, Jyoti grew exasperated, until one day she pulled me close, held my waist tight, and pinched me. As I howled in pain, she laughed adding that I seemed too thin to be married (*lagti to nahi ho*),<sup>1</sup> with a strong suggestion that I should be *enjoying* with her. I concede that Jyoti’s trick sort of worked, because from then on, we went around town together: she as the lead, me as her wing(wo)man.

Such a play with intimacy allowed Jyoti to reconstitute herself after an attempted suicide over a cheating boyfriend. After this failed pursuit of love, Jyoti insisted that *enjoying* with strangers would not lead to love or marriage. Enjoyment, I discovered over time, is a version of love that offers short-term pleasures and the possibility of play by cultivating erotic desire in casual encounters. Such encounters may seem like dating now common in India’s cities and include going to the cinema, exchanging small gifts, or cracking flirtatious jokes with a partner in the malls and parks (Bhandari 2020; Derné 2000; Lukose 2009). However, instead of leading to a future with marriage, these encounters were defiantly presentist. They were also strategic, as women referred to enjoyment as a version of *dimaagwala pyaar*, or love (*pyaar*) conducted with the mind (*dimaag*). This implied a calculated emotional investment into the pursuit, and withdrawal if challenges emerge. This love stood beside *dilwala pyaar*, or love (*pyaar*) conducted by the heart (*dil*): an uncontrollable and yet sacred feeling that ought to be pursued to marriage. This fragmentation of love (*pyaar*) into different kinds plays with expectations in present-day Ghaziabad that love should lead to a future, that is, marriage.<sup>2</sup> As a short-lived kind of love, enjoyment allows middle-class

women to play with a future of compulsory marriages while enrolled in a college education that enables their access to the city.<sup>3</sup> It emerges under conditions of pervasive unemployment among educated men and women, something that prevents them from marrying against their family's wishes. And even as women maintained that enjoyment would not lead to a future, it provided pleasure and hope, helping educated young women like Jyoti unexpectedly realize their ideals of desirable futures.

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In this article, I explore how women engage with and discover forms of love, enjoyment, pleasure, and desire that do not necessarily lead to marriage in the context of urbanization, the rise of women's education, and pervasive unemployment in Ghaziabad. In so doing, women discover that erotic desire need not be restricted to love in a marriage and can be cultivated without assuming that it will lead to either love or marriage. Love, in this article, is not simply a "pure" feeling of care and concern for another that helps people work toward a desirable future (Giddens 1991). Rather, it is a constantly shifting narration in time of how people experience and make sense of their feelings of attraction for another (Ahearn 2001; Berlant 2011; Maqsood 2021; Wynn 2018). These feelings can range from spontaneous attraction to a bond that emerges through shared life experiences over time. Love can be fun, pleasurable, and caring, but it can also be also jealous, aggressive, and hopeless. Yet what is experienced and validated as love is determined by social and cultural strictures over its narration. The experiences of love and their narrations shift over time as changing socioeconomic circumstances, such as urbanization and rising unemployment, bear down on the subject. Love, in other words, comes in many varieties, each with its own set of emotional expressions and registers of erotic desire (Lindholm 2006; Orsini 2006; Mian 2019; Vanita 2005). These feelings condition people's temporal expectations for what kind of love can be experienced with whom and for how long.

In postcolonial India, monogamy has become a norm, and love (or *pyaar*) receives social validation through marriage (Basu 2015; Donner 2002; Mody 2008). It was not always like this. Historically, marriages were "arranged" by the parents within caste and religious boundaries. There was no expectation that these arrangements will involve love or a romantic bond between couples. Instead, such marriages were undertaken primarily for the perpetuation of families while love was found in relationships outside of these arranged marriages. This changed with colonial and postcolonial laws that instituted monogamy in

marriages, removing the possibilities of second or third relationships, and in the process cemented the idea that *pyaar* should lead to one marriage possible over a lifetime. This kind of love (*pyaar* or simply *dilwala pyaar*) involves pleasure alongside suffering to care for another. It typically emerges through cohabitation and the sharing of life experiences over time. But when this kind of love emerges before marriage, even for people within the same caste or religious backgrounds, it is narrated as “a hapless feeling” that compels people to go against the family’s wishes to marry the persons of their choosing (Ahearn 2001; Hansen 1991; Mody 2008). Although self-choosing marriages<sup>4</sup> can take place across caste and religious boundaries, parental support for them is contingent on the wealth and influence of the person women seek to marry (Abraham 2014; Bhandari 2020). Going against the parents’ wishes can lead to excommunication from families (Grover 2017). Enjoyment (or *dimaagwala pyaar*) as a form of love that thrives on sexual frisson and play in urban spaces seeks to circumvent these caste- and class-based restrictions over love, sex, and marriage in Ghaziabad. It uncouples desiring practices of flirting and joking from their assumed progression to love (*pyaar*) or marriage.

Ethnographically focusing on enjoyment as an alternate form of love challenges the idealization of love in anthropology and philosophy as a “revolutionary force” that is expected to usher in a utopian future where love overcomes social differences of class or caste, and leads to a desirable middle-class future of marriage and monogamy (Ahearn 2001; Cole and Thomas 2009; Das 1995; Mody 2008; Rapport 2018). Enjoyment also helps question the disregard of love in cultural studies and queer theory as a cruel space of unreciprocated care and concern that exploits human emotions, and instead of leading to a utopian future, *keeps things the same* (Abraham 2014; Berlant 2011; Basu 2015; Federici 1975; Illouz 2007, 17; Paik 2022; Povinelli 2006). Love, in this register, constitutes a cruel repetition of gestures of romance that provides the comfort of *being able to hope* for middle-class futures—even as those futures never arrive (Berlant 2001). As we shall see, my interlocutors’ love for men, often in insecure jobs, nurtured their hopes of joining urban middle-class lives, also depicted in Bollywood films, where love leading to marriage<sup>5</sup> is the norm (Bhandari 2020; Donner 2016). This *hope*, as Lauren Berlant suggests, turned cruel and became an obstacle to women’s flourishing in the face of the deceptions of their boyfriends who would not marry them and the coercions of their families who wanted to marry them off. In contrast, enjoyment as a temporary kind of love allowed women to work past the cruel optimism of love leading to marriage. Women’s time before

marriage was vital to their futures, so while enrolled in college, they used enjoyment to experiment with intimacies. Instead of *timepass* or meaninglessly hanging out in the city while waiting for a desirable future to arrive (Jeffrey 2010), my interlocutors creatively thought through love and reconstituted it as a site for self-affirmation, pleasure, and erotic relationships with friends, sisters-in-law, and brothers-in-law. In so doing, women used this short-lived type of love to reshape their futures even in the face of hopelessness and middle-class precarity.

The essay is organized as follows: the first part situates companionate practices of *enjoying* within broader global debates about love, enjoyment, and middle-classness. The next section shows how young women worked out ideas of love, marriage, and pleasure in their lives through banter and play; the final part discusses how such practices allowed women to redefine love and relationships with family and friends. All in all, this research contributes to anthropological discussions about contemporary forms of love that shape and enable orientation towards the future in middle-class women's lives.

### LOVE AS ENJOYMENT

The association of love with the pursuit of a desirable future is a recurring theme in social theory. Philosophers from Søren Kierkegaard to Luce Irigaray (1980) argue that love is a “pure” feeling of care and concern for another that compels people to overcome self-centered behaviors.<sup>6</sup> If channeled correctly, this feeling for another can help overcome class and gendered differences and usher in a utopian future where these inequalities matter less (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Giddens 1991). For anthropologists, love likewise helps couples create a world separate and often in opposition to social norms (Ahearn 2001; Das 1995; Gell 2011; Hardt 2011; Mody 2008; Rapport 2018; Shah 2013). This kind of love is removed both from the pursuit of sexual pleasure (Reddy 2012) and from contractual obligations of social and legal marriages that sustain communities (Abu-Lughod 2016; Giddens 1991; Lévi-Strauss 1969; Kaur and Palriwala 2014; Ramberg 2014; Strathern 1990; Rubin 1975; Roy 2022).<sup>7</sup>

Against this idealization, however, in India, love that entails a separation from the family often leads to precarity (Abraham 2014; Chowdhry 2011; Grover 2017; see also, Majumdar 2009; and Paik 2022 for a historical overview). This is because, historically, love or a romantic bond between couples was incidental in an arranged marriage, which were primarily organized for the perpetuation of families.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, *enjoyment* was a derogatory way of addressing practices of plural marriages, customary divorces, and cohabitation common among the

lower castes in precolonial India (Basu 2015, 63). These practices were regarded as threats to monogamy and outlawed by the colonial and postcolonial Indian state (Sen 1999). Therefore, in present-day Ghaziabad, as throughout northern India, where monogamous marriages have become the norm, families still excommunicate couples who marry for love in violation of an obligation to families (Abraham 2014; Chowdhry 2011). Yet the family's support proves especially important in urbanizing regions of northern India where education does not lead to secure jobs or *timepass* (Jeffrey 2010), and where a decline in agricultural income has been replaced by rental income from the development of family's farmlands into flats and shops. These middle-class formations have increased women's enrollment in education (John 2021), a prerequisite for marrying into a wealthier household, or "hypergamy" (Majumdar 2004; Thapan 2003), enabling their mobility and also raising the age of marriage, so that they spend longer in their natal homes. At the same time, women's education has also imposed stricter restrictions on whom they can marry (Abraham 2014; Chaudhry 2021),<sup>9</sup> making love leading to a happy-ever-after marriage an unattainable aspiration (Abraham 2014; Basu 2015; Dyson 2018; Kang 2023).<sup>10</sup>

However, Berlant (2011) argues that women pursue love even after realizing that it may not lead to a desirable future because it provides the comfort of *being able to hope* for a different kind of future. Berlant explains that this hope can be cruel in the Euro-American context if it traps the subject in the pursuit of unattainable middle-class futures of stable jobs and marriages and impedes her flourishing. As I will show, my interlocutors' hopes of marrying less well-off men in Ghaziabad, in line with Bollywood romances where love overcomes all obstacles and leads to marriage, became a cruel obstacle in women's lives, just as Berlant suggests.<sup>11</sup> In the ruins of this failed pursuit of love, my respondents kindled erotic desire in casual encounters, "enjoying," and they did so by drawing on older ideas of erotic cultivation in the region (Rege 1995; Jassal 2012). Such practices are not unique to urban India and seem increasingly common in other geographies, as marriages come under strain due to a lack of secure middle-class jobs (see, for example, Archambault 2013; Cole 2010; Nyamnjoh 2009; Wynn 2018; Takeyama 2016). In these contexts, temporary relationships outside of marriage provide women self-affirmation, pleasure, and access to some middle-class goods and comforts (Alexy 2020; Groes-Green 2014; Illouz 2007; McDonald 2019; Newell 2012). In Ghaziabad, however, marriages for women are a non-negotiable certainty; they are regarded a sacrament that needs fulfillment regardless of financial uncertainties or domestic violence (Chaudhry 2021).

At the same time, historically common second or third marriages and customary divorces are increasingly unavailable to middle-class women, causing despair about women's marital futures. In this context, where the future seems bleak, college-attending women creatively improvise enjoyment *before* entering a monogamous marriage. Interestingly, my interlocutors referred to enjoyment as a form of love (*dimaagwala pyaar*), or love conducted with the mind. Instead of the progression to marriage, this new kind of love remained defiantly presentist.

By narrating and experiencing enjoyment as a form of love, women pointed to a historical understanding in South Asia that love exists in many forms.<sup>12</sup> These forms of love shift in response to social histories and political realities, such as colonization and urbanization (Hansen 1991; Mian 2019). The re-emergence of enjoyment in urban spaces reflects how the liberalization of the Indian economy has fused city life with sexual desire, designating the urban as a space for experimenting with intimacies (Mazzarella 2003; Mani 2014; Srivastava 2014). City life then often reproduces heteronormativity and marriage (Ramberg 2016). However, the narration of enjoyment as a short-lived kind of love shows how women creatively improvised temporary relationships without expecting it to lead to marriage. They did so by reworking Bollywood romances where love leads to marriage (Dwyer 2000; see Simone 2018 on relationships as urban resources), adapting them to their local setting. Enjoyment, then, departs from what love (*pyaar*) means in a conventional sense in Ghaziabad, but it is also more grounded in women's desires. For example, while love in my field site was described and experienced as an overwhelming feeling expected to lead to marriage (Mody 2008; see also Maqsood 2021), it was typically conducted with the heart (*dilwala pyaar*), involved selfless care, and was only possible with one person. In contrast, enjoyment was not expected to lead to an enduring relationship, and therefore one could *enjoy* with many people, often across caste, religious, and gender boundaries. And while love (*pyaar*) involved suffering that could over time lead to a lack of sex (then it is narrated as *prem*), enjoyment raised the possibility of sex, which may or may not happen.<sup>13</sup> And even as *enjoying* was not expected to lead to a future, it was still future-oriented, as it sought long-term stability, but on different terms, by reshaping relationships with sisters-in-law and friends in erotic registers. In what follows, I illustrate how women use enjoyment to reshape their futures on their terms.

I arrived in Ghaziabad City to understand how tertiary education changes women's subjectivities and discovered that although women's ideals of marriage had changed to include love (*dilwala pyaar*) and care from their partners

(Jeffery 2014), my interlocutors and their sisters struggled to meet these ideals in practice. The three interlocutors in this article, Jyoti, Priyanka, and Nagma, belonged to established middle-class families. During fieldwork, they were trying to turn love (*dilwala pyaar*) for their boyfriends, who were in poorly paid, insecure jobs, into marriages even as their parents sought to control when and whom they married and whether they attended college. Jyoti, the twenty-four-year-old Dalit respondent with whom I started the essay, for example, insisted that enjoyment with men and women would not lead to love (*pyaar*). She learned this, she told me, after attempting suicide after her boyfriend, from the same caste (Jatav), cheated. In contrast, Priyanka *enjoyed* with friends and me often while waiting to meet her boyfriend, a married man belonging to a caste (Jats) higher than hers (Jatav). Finally, Nagma, an upper-caste Muslim (Khan) respondent estranged from her family, insisted that she was *enjoying* with her Hindu boyfriend while working out ideals of love in her life. Her boyfriend belonged to a land-owning caste (Gurjar) and depended on his mother's rental income for expenses.

My presence as an educated upper-caste (Khatri) Punjabi woman in a long-distance relationship allowed differences around relationships, caste, class, and age to emerge and be openly discussed (Ciotti 2011), though never fully transcended (Shankar 2022).<sup>14</sup> The three women served as role models for their friends for how to *enjoy* in Ghaziabad City. And yet, their stories of love “gone wrong” (Pinto 2014) were also cautionary tales for them to *not* pursue love (*pyaar*) leading to marriage. Therefore, many if not most of the one hundred middle-class and lower-middle-class young women and twenty men respondents in Ghaziabad, Hapur, and Meerut Districts insisted that they *enjoyed* without ever having pursued love (*pyaar*) leading to marriage.<sup>15</sup> In moments of quiet reflection, though, they referred to enjoyment as a form of love without a future (see also Dave 2018) and entered arranged marriages. In the next sections, I describe and discuss the pursuit of love and enjoyment among middle-class young people in Ghaziabad, starting with Priyanka's pursuit of love (*pyaar* or *dilwala*) leading to marriage.

### LOVE'S FUTURES?

“Rehte rehte pyaar badta hain,” love slowly emerges in a marriage, Priyanka's aunties consoled her after she rejected yet another match arranged by her relatives. Her aunties were trying to deflect her negative first impressions of a proposed suitor by evoking a long-standing ideal that love is expected to emerge

in a marriage not from initial attraction, but through cohabitation over a lifetime. In contrast, young women with whom I worked for this research like Priyanka narrated love as a feeling of instant attraction. “You can’t just love anyone. Love just happens!” they told me. Such discussions about when love appears and how long it would last reflect how women sought to work out the different kinds of love that were possible and available in their futures.

Priyanka, for example, believed that if love was not there at the start, in an initial meeting, then it would not grow in marriage either. It seemed to her that love in a marriage diminished over time. She pointed out that, after years of marriage, her elder sister’s husband publicly humiliated her sister and pointed out the flaws in her speech and gait, taunting her over how much she ate. And while my interlocutors believed that an ideal husband demonstrates love and care by meeting a woman’s desires (*woh bahut pyaar karte hain, unki har khawash poori karte hain*) (Wadley 1994; Zharkevich 2019), Priyanka observed that her sister’s husband often denied her requests for washing machines or mobile phones, which her father then provided.

To Priyanka, such deflection to women’s families for financial and emotional care signaled that husbands did not provide loving care in marriage. It seemed unsurprising to her, therefore, when several marriage proposals for her ended over demands that an SUV be included in her dowry. For the young women in this article, middle-class futures of love in a marriage—expressed through expensive gift exchanges at festivals, high demands for dowry from the bride’s parents, and dwelling in a nuclear family—made for an uncertain possibility (cf. Donner 2016; Ponniah 2017). While their farming families gained wealth through rising land prices around Delhi, these developments have not resulted in secure incomes (Jeffrey and Young 2014), leading to marital disputes and divorces over desires for consumer items. Rising dowries that make match-making difficult on a family’s finances (Basu 2015; Jeffery 2014; see Majumdar 2009 for a historical overview) and lead to repeated rejections also affected my respondents’ self-esteem. Love, and its many forms, in this context of frequent refusals and breakdowns of relationships, offers a kind of reprieve.

Priyanka, for example, did not expect to fall in love with her boyfriend. When she met him, he looked young and had a good body and sense of humor, she told me. At first, he pursued her, she insisted (*woh mere piche aaya tha*). But once the relationship was established, Priyanka discovered that he was married and had a wife and two children in a village outside of Ghaziabad. Moreover, he was not educated and did not have a secure job, even though he belonged to a

land-owning caste higher up in the caste hierarchy than her own. Still, Priyanka wanted to marry him, expecting him to leave his wife. Priyanka told me that she had not even *enjoyed* with anyone before him. She narrated this kind of love for her boyfriend as a sacred bond or *dilwala pyaar*, or a kind of love conducted with the heart. These powerful feelings, women argued, appeared out of the blue, often at first sight, and were experienced as a hapless feeling over which they had no control. For Priyanka, this kind of love for a married man constituted madness (*pagpalpan*) that drove her to contemplate a future of marriage with a man who told her that he would not leave his wife. And yet, she felt compelled to pursue this kind of love leading to marriage—despite opposition from her family—and without regard for caste and social strictures (Ahearn 2001; Maqsood 2021; Mody 2008; cf. Govindrajana 2021).

In Bollywood films, love (*pyaar* or *dilwala pyaar*) that drives people to give up their families in pursuit of the lover is often shown to lead to a happy-ever-after future of marriage (Dwyer 2000; see also Pandian 2015).<sup>16</sup> However, Priyanka's reality in Ghaziabad differed starkly: on discovering her relationship with a married man, her parents tried to hastily arrange her marriage within the Dalit community. She repeatedly declined those matches by pointing out that the proposed men were dark-skinned or too short. Responding to her insistence, her parents called her boyfriend, who denied their relationship, saying that he was already married and Priyanka was mad (*pagal*). From then on, everyone in Priyanka's family stopped speaking with her (*poochte nahi; chod diya*), a form of cruelty historically observed in India and beyond when women do not conform to social rules (Paik 2022).

Priyanka's desires for this particular boyfriend constitutes *dilwala pyaar*, a kind of devotion to the beloved (Orsini 2006), a historically common way of experiencing love in this region. Priyanka explained that love (*diwala pyaar*) gave her strength to endure the burns on her stomach from when her brother threw tea after she did not agree to marry the man her parents had chosen for her. She narrated love (*diwala pyaar*) as forgiveness as she waited for her boyfriend even when he was attending to his family, regularly turned off the phone, and did not meet her for weeks at a time (*main hafton wait karti hoon aur naraaz nahi hoti*). Love (*pyaar*) for Priyanka was both a hapless feeling (Mody 2008; Maqsood 2021) and labor (Govindrajana 2021). Priyanka undertook this labor because she wanted to turn her love into longer-term, enduring marriage. As Priyanka's family tried to get her to move on, she enrolled in a law program. She regarded this as *timepass* to signal the futility of studying in securing a middle-class job to

achieve the life of her imagination (Jeffrey 2010).<sup>17</sup> Instead of studying, Priyanka tried to start an illicit business with her boyfriend, promising government jobs to aspiring teachers. She did this hoping to draw him closer and have money to buy a flat to live with him (“live-in” relationship). The business, however, led to a physical tussle between Priyanka and her boyfriend. Her boyfriend further threatened her parents to keep a check on her, leaving Priyanka seriously unwell. For days, Priyanka’s family restricted her from going to college and took away her phone and money.

In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant (2010, 94; 2011) explores the pursuit of a middle-class future in “compromised conditions of possibility.” Berlant conceptualizes this space between ideals and reality as one of cruelty, where a subject’s investment in the pursuit of love comes at the cost of the exploration of other worlds that would enable a subject’s flourishing (2011). Such an emotional investment in love to achieve a *semblance* of a middle-class life, Berlant (2011) explains, exhausts the subject. The Urdu poet Ghalib likewise cautions against a complete immersion in the pursuit of love that causes a subject to withdraw from world-building activities that could enable her flourishing (Pugh 1991). As a subject tries harder and harder to remain close to her object of desire (e.g., a boyfriend), she loses the ability to explore other possibilities that could see her thriving. For young women like Priyanka, the pursuit of love with a less well-off man, one who even denied the existence of their relationship, caused an emotional separation from her family, who had at initially tried to support her. Priyanka’s unwavering hope for her love (*diwala pyaar*) left her seriously unwell, and she kept declining to meet the matches that could lead to a different future.

This type of love (*dilwala pyaar*) that is expected to lead to marriage reproduces the dynamics of subordination of women’s desires in relationships. It also does not lead to change in women’s lives or to social change, where people can marry outside of caste or religious boundaries. However, even as Priyanka absorbed the pitfalls of pursuing love (*dilwala pyaar*), she discovered an alternate space to cultivate and experience sexual attraction in the new retail malls and parks in Ghaziabad City. In the mall, she used naughty gestures, such as winking, pouting, and sexual innuendo to have fun. My interlocutors narrated erotic practices such as these as *enjoyment* and insisted that they would not lead to *pyaar*. Interestingly, Priyanka explained these practices as a kind of love that involved working with one’s brains (*dimaagwala pyaar*) in pursuit of one’s desires for middle-class activities, such as dining out, having fun at the mall (Brosius 2010; Anjaria and Anjaria 2020)—and exiting relationships if challenges emerged.

Priyanka pointed out, for example, that her friends who *enjoyed* with several people did not suffer by waiting for their boyfriends like she did. Instead, they often broke up if their boyfriends did not return their phone calls. Enjoyment, for her, emerged as a cultivated practice that gave primacy to her desires for a middle-class life.

In these erotic encounters, women specifically sought middle-class men, typically from Jat, Gurjar, Yadav,<sup>18</sup> or Muslim landholding communities in the region,<sup>19</sup> but also less well-off “local” men they encountered in college. Jyoti, my interlocutor who constantly asked me to *enjoy* with her, explained that she always sought men who would “look good on the arm” (*saath chale to acha lage*); who would be “fair and tall” (*mujhe lambe aur gore admi ko kiss karna hain*), emphasizing her desires for an equal match both in looks and pace of life. They would be brusque on the outside, to fend off unwanted suitors, but pliant when she tried out makeup and bags in the mall. Priyanka’s experiences were similar. With these boyfriends, these young women engaged in middle-class activities, such as dinners out or watching films. Jyoti, for example, explained to me that she engaged in the typical middle-class activity of “sex-talk” or discussions on sexual practices (Uberoi 2011) with middle-class men of her choosing. Such sexual innuendo both provided her laughter and excitement, while also allowing her to embody the Bollywood portrayal of middle-class women hanging out in the malls and coffee shops in India’s bigger cities (Bhandari 2023; Anjaria and Anjaria 2020), even as dating was not a common premarital practice among the lower middle class in 2015–2016.

In practice, women like Priyanka and Jyoti engaged in *enjoying* after a failed pursuit of love. However, the maintenance of a distinction between these two forms of love—*enjoying* and love (*pyaar*)—shapes women’s expectations of the future. Women narrated and experienced enjoyment as a present-oriented activity that would not lead to love with a future (*pyaar*). While love (*dilwala pyaar*) in Ghaziabad entailed suffering, waiting for a boyfriend, and neglect by families and the men, *enjoying* allowed them to play with the erotic affordances of the city. It enabled them to have fun and experiment with gender norms, puncturing men’s fantasies of women’s humiliation. It was hopeless to pursue love, Priyanka concluded after her boyfriend told her that he would not leave his wife. She argued instead that women who sought enjoyment were better off (*jo ladkiyan practical hoti hain woh theek rehti hain jo dil se nahin dimaag se pyaar karti hain*). As I will show next, these two types of love are often pursued side by side, one feeding the other. Just as enjoyment emerges when love (*diwala pyaar*) does not work out,

it also helps women redefine what kind of love they could have in their lives, offering them sustenance and hope against hope.

### PLAYFUL ENJOYMENT

During her relationship with her boyfriend, Priyanka was adept at seeking fun in public spaces (“Priyanka makes everyone *enjoy!*” her friends often told me). One afternoon, she and I were waiting for her boyfriend after watching a film in the mall. She was touching up her makeup in the washroom when he texted to say that he would not be able to come. Priyanka was upset, but she walked out of the washrooms determined not to let this show. A group of young men were hanging out at the popcorn counter. Priyanka made eye contact with them, pursed her lips, and asked me to look their way: “See, how they are checking me out!” (*Dekh, kaise dekh rahe hain.*) The men looked right back at us. They followed us out of the mall and chased us in the autorickshaw, blowing kisses through the window. They tried to give Priyanka their numbers, but Priyanka declined. She smiled and shouted “No!” emptily waving her hand at them. She explained to me that the men had taken it too seriously (*woh kahaan se piche lag gaya, patanka sa*). For her, this was meaningless fun (*aise hi!*)

An exchange of glances, a brief dialogue, or a kiss blown at a passerby all form part of romantic pursuit (Philip 2022; Osella and Osella 1998). However, by referring to this practice as meaningless fun, Priyanka was playing down expectations set in Bollywood cinema and among societal elders that flirting would lead to a longer-term engagement with the men. For middle-class young women in Ghaziabad like Priyanka, such temporary encounters with men play up the possibility of sex, which may or may not happen. My interlocutors practice enjoyment as a kind of love conducted with the mind (*dimaagwala pyaar*), as it privileges women’s aspirations for hanging out in middle-class spaces in the city. This kind of love is available to these women in urbanizing Ghaziabad and marks a distinct phase in their lives before marriage. During this time, my interlocutors learn how love shifts forms from one kind (*dilwala pyaar*) to another (enjoyment) when economic and social structures bear down on them.

These practices of enjoyment borrow from older forms of erotic cultivation through, for example, libertine jokes, *galis* (abusive language), or ribald songs that play up sexual charge inherent in relationships to challenge existing caste and gender relations (Jassal 2012). They bring to light ephemeral connections not expected to lead anywhere, for example, with a husband’s elder brother or father-in-law (Chowdhry 2011; Jassal 2012; Raheja and Gold 1994)—although

sometimes they do (Sharma 1978).<sup>20</sup> The difference is that educated young women in Ghaziabad across castes enjoy with committed, unavailable, or taboo sexual partners, often merging the older forms with newer depictions as set by Bollywood films, where the middle classes are expected to “enjoy” in disparate consumer settings—from fashion to mobile phones, from restaurants to condoms—outside of the rigid social norms attached to caste and gender (Liechty 2005; Mazzarella 2003, 70–71). Enjoyment provides self-affirmation, pleasure, and care. It creates a new space for women’s autonomy in “out-of-the-way” spaces on the urban edges of Delhi in Ghaziabad, as well as in Noida, Meerut, and Faridabad (see also Brunson 2014; Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2011; Roy 2022).

Take, for example, Nagma’s cross-caste, same-gendered friendship with Kriti that, as I will show, plays up the erotic possibilities of relationships before marriage by engaging with the aesthetic culture of the mall. Nagma, an upper-caste Muslim met Kriti, a young woman from a mid-ranking caste of gardeners, at a coaching center when preparing for the Civil Services examination. Together, they spent time in malls further away from Ghaziabad, in the neighboring district of Noida. They chose these spaces to avoid getting caught by Nagma’s family, who were looking at that time for a match for her within the Muslim community. After an introduction to a thirty-five-year-old man from her community, whom Nagma found “disgusting,” she called her boyfriend at that time to discuss their future, but he did not show up. Nagma then invited Kriti, two friends from the coaching center, and me to the mall. She was seeking relief and poking fun at every possible opportunity. That day, as we walked past a billboard with a bikini-clad model lying on a beach, Kriti pointed to the model’s cleavage and tugged at Nagma. Nagma laughed at Kriti’s suggestion and goaded her, “Go on, check her out, Kriti!” She informed me that Kriti went around malls checking out other women. “You should have been a man,” Nagma said, now playing with Kriti’s hand.

By kindling desire with Kriti, Nagma worked with the playful, teasing, and aggressive genres of desire (Hendriks 2016; Jassal 2012; Krishnan 2016). Kriti’s lower-caste status and her physical shortness made her an unlikely suitor for Nagma in the conventional sense that regards tall men from dominant castes as desirable partners. But enjoyment makes it possible to rework these ideals, even if only discursively. Faced with a future that seemed bleak, enjoyment allowed Nagma to play with gender norms of intimacy, and this itself was a source of women’s hopes. By offering her emotional care, and pleasure, Kriti challenged the idea that only men could do so in a marriage. Later among friends, Kriti

put her arm around Nagma's shoulder, raising alarm among the men who derided their friendship: "These two are always together!" But Kriti raised her chin at the men and asserted, "Yes, we are lesbians!" holding onto Nagma. Her gesture portrayed Kriti as Nagma's protector, and played down the fantasy that only a boyfriend could provide financial care or protection (Philip 2022, 149; cf. Basu 2020). In so doing, Kriti and Nagma escaped the instrumental logic that the cultivation of desire should lead to marriage. Instead, through laughter and play, they lived out their imaginations of relationships in the here and now, even against the men's policing and castigation. The mere existence of hope for finding comfort among same-gender friends makes for a political stance against the hopeless circumstances that suggest otherwise.

These quotidian spaces of pleasure and play allow educated young women to rediscover forms of love, such as *enjoying*, where joy and laughter offered at least some opportunity for experimentation with intimacy. These practices emerge out of women's frustrations with a lack of love and care in increasingly commercialized arranged marriages, on the one hand, and the unreliability of boyfriends whom they love, on the other. However, time and time again, women discover that enjoyment does not lead to changes either. Sometimes, the realization strikes when their friends ask for sexual favors; other times, when men resort to stalking, abusive phone calls, or threats of speaking with their parents and sharing her photos with the woman's new partner. In despair, women give up chasing the "not yet" of an imagined future (Appadurai 2004; Miyazaki 2006) of egalitarian friendships with men as templates for future marriages. Instead, like Nagma that day, they insist on chasing pleasure, regarding it as a locus of a diffuse kind of hope against hope (Crapanzano 2003; see also Foucault 1997).

"Enjoy today, who knows about tomorrow," my respondents often told me when persuading me to join them. This insistent disregard for the future shows that these pleasures are not goal-directed. Rather the pursuit of pleasure allows them to hope for the present to turn out otherwise in the face of hopelessness (Crapanzano 2003). And even though this presentist kind of love is forever in danger of being subsumed by larger neoliberal transformations that privilege immediacy and heteronormativity (Menon 2009; Ramberg 2016; Kornbluh 2023), love in this part of South Asia has historically constituted a site for developing emotional sensibilities (Schofield 2021; Mian 2019). In my research, the immersion in the pursuit of love allows educated young women to trick time (Bear 2016) by lingering in the malls of Ghaziabad City,<sup>21</sup> especially as their access to these spaces is restricted by their marital status and class position.<sup>22</sup> Therefore,

when they are able to do so, such hopes, cultivated together with others, allow middle-class women like Nagma, Jyoti, Priyanka, and Kriti to re-imagine and discover new types of love.

### MOCKING MARRIAGE

“There is someone for me somewhere,” Nagma told me one day as she left her home after a tussle with her mother and brother who had beaten her and threatened to kill her if she did not marry the man of their choosing. Marriage negotiations still loom large in educated women’s lives in Ghaziabad, and these negotiations taught them that enjoyment was most likely just a phase in their lives, which they would need to give up to ultimately marry within caste and class boundaries. Nagma’s marriage proposal came from her sister’s brother-in-law. It included a flat in a prestigious locality for Nagma’s natal family as bride price, an offer was too good to be missed, her brother told her. But Nagma was alarmed to find that her prospective husband wanted Nagma to wear a veil, not use WhatsApp, or work after marriage. Nagma noted these restrictions as signs of a broader incompatibility in their worldviews and pleaded with her family to allow her to finish her law degree while they looked for someone more suitable. Yet they dismissed her education as something unimportant in comparison to the possibility of such a good match. The evening after the tussle, she told me, she had vomited all over the place and no one in the family had come to help her. She felt powerless, and defeated (*koi taras nahi aaya, meri naak aur lips se khoon nikal raha tha, lekin koi taras nahi aaya*).

A lack of say over one’s marriage is historically understood as a form of cruelty among educated Muslim women (Alam 2021, 30), and Nagma registered her brother’s and mother’s insistence that she marry the thirty-five-year-old man against her own desires as morally unacceptable. As a response, she left her family the day after the fight. Recalling her actions, she shared with me that she did so under the guise of taking an exam. Outside at the District Magistrate’s office, where I accompanied her, she doubted herself for a few moments. She wondered if after leaving her family, she would ever be able to financially and emotionally sustain herself as a woman living by herself in Delhi. Her then Hindu boyfriend, from the landowning Gurjar caste, was adamant that he would not marry her, a Muslim woman, as this would be against his mother’s wishes who provided a share of the family’s rental income for his expenses. But Nagma tried to remain optimistic. She told me that she hoped that she would not be single for the rest of her life or have to give up Islam to marry her boyfriend. She hoped, too, that

she would find a suitable Muslim man who would love her, value her education, and not object to her working after marriage—a middle-class ideal common among upper-caste professionals (Baas 2009; Fuller and Narasimhan 2007). In the meanwhile, she insisted on *enjoying* with her boyfriend. *Enjoying*, in this register, denoted an immersion in sexual pleasure that kept Nagma from thinking about her troubles. “Two hours with him pass by like two minutes,” she told me as she pointed at the glow on her face one afternoon (*barabar ka len-den*). And yet, when I asked her whether she would marry her boyfriend, she responded angrily that people in their thirties, like I was, always suggested marriage, and insisted that she was *enjoying*, and that doing so did not mean she intended to marry her boyfriend.

In moments of enjoyment, Nagma, Priyanka, and Jyoti contemplated the (im)possibilities of combining excitement, sexual pleasure, and desires for gendered progress with middle-class comforts available in a marriage. For example, while Nagma enjoyed the sex with her boyfriend, she explained that her boyfriend, too, not only expected her not to work after marriage but that he hoped her to raise two boys, despite her wishes to someday have a boy and a girl. To her, this expectation signaled the same kind of subordination of her desires that she had already faced in the family she had just left behind. Therefore, despite the challenges of a single life in Delhi, Nagma insisted that she would not marry her boyfriend. Instead, she pointed to a successful marriage of a Muslim woman with a Jat man in her new neighborhood in Noida as an example. In this marriage, the man supported the woman against his own mother. He also had a secure income, unlike Nagma’s boyfriend at the time, who depended on his mother. These intimacies transformed Nagma’s ideas of love and the possibilities of the relationships herein. For example, she retained her friendships with Kriti and the men from the coaching center, who helped pay a deposit toward a room, while continuing to *enjoy* with her boyfriend and hoping to find a suitable life partner.

Enjoyment, in this time before marriage, allowed young middle-class women like Nagma to learn to disentangle themselves from the cruel pursuit of love (*pyaar*) to lead to marriage. It created a pause or a suspension to focus on the pleasures of the city by seeking enjoyment with strangers. Jyoti, for example, told me that she hoped that enjoyment would cause men to change how they treated women. If not through love, she argued, then through revenge (*badla*). In town, then, Jyoti sought enjoyment with men as a way of teasing men’s desires (*chedna*). She told me that she made the men wait for her, intentionally turning

up late for dates and switching off her phone immediately after a really fun date. She told me that she waited for hours before replying to the men's messages, prompting them to send multiple messages ("Did I do anything, *jaanu?*"), *enjoying* their anxiety and frustration caused by her lack of response. Her practices were examples of an inversion of well-established gendered power dynamics that consider those waiting, normally women, as less powerful (Chakrabarty 2000). And yet when I asked Jyoti about hurting the men's feelings even when some discussed marriage and seemed serious, she rhetorically asked me, "Well, why is he a man?" (*Woh ladka kyun bana*). Jyoti explained to me that she was only doing what men have historically done to women, and argued that after her boyfriend of eight years cheated on her, she had attempted suicide. She had loved (*dilwala pyaar*) her boyfriend, but struggled to explain her actions to her parents, who worried for her and grounded her for several months ("I woke up to see my brother crying at the edge of the hospital bed and realized who actually cared for me"). Jyoti never shared with her family that she had attempted suicide over a boyfriend, thereby avoiding the kinds of treatment that both Nagma and Priyanka faced. Since the suicide attempt, however, she no longer allowed herself to expect or fall in love in these interactions. Instead, she simply *enjoyed* with the men, without regard for their feelings.

Enjoyment is an edgy form of love that thrives on sexual frisson and tension. Its eroticism allows educated young women to play with gender norms by giving primacy to women's desires, if only temporarily. In so doing, enjoyment provides hope and nourishment to feed the imagination of a version of love—and a world—not latched to marriage. The middle-class young women with whom I interacted for this research, for example, finally concluded that a middle-class life without loyal husbands was not only possible but, in some cases, desirable (see also Osella 2012), leading them to cultivate erotic relationships with friends. Priyanka joked, "If girls have money, they can *enjoy* by themselves, like Binu and I *enjoy*. There is no need for men!" Laughing and emphasizing her erotic friendship with Binu, a single woman in her forties who lived in a house by herself (see also Lamb 2022), Priyanka learned, too, that she was not interested in pursuing a relationship with men from the dominant castes, for example, Jats (*Jaton mein nahi ab*). Instead, she started to regularly meet the matches her parents suggested. In the meantime, she told me that she wanted to *enjoy* with men before marriage, like her friends did, and began to eye a Punjabi boy who manned a mobile phone store for her next episode of enjoyment.

Even as women like Priyanka, Nagma, and Jyoti insisted that enjoyment was a type of love without a future, enjoyment did lead to a different kind of

future for them. In this future, the erotic allowed women to explore the human need for intimacy outside of the instrumental logic of exchange (Joseph 2005; Hendriks 2016; cf. Groes-Green 2014). The erotic also afforded hopes for disruption and play (Han 2017) that allowed my respondents to continue hoping in the face of hopelessness. In so doing, young middle-class women in Ghaziabad did not reject marriage altogether. Rather, they became savvier when approaching marriage. My interlocutors learned from their broken fantasies of love the role of pleasure in reconstituting love in their lives in a less idealized Bollywood sense of a happy-ever-after. They entered relationships with men with a more real sense of what could be had, with whom, and how. Such enjoyment allowed them to bring the love with their minds (*dimaagwala pyaar*) in sync with the love with their hearts (*dilwala pyaar*) (hooks 2003, 207).

After enjoying with her boyfriend from 2017 to 2020, Nagma married a man from the Muslim community in 2020. This match had been suggested by her parents following a reconciliation initiated by Nagma's elder sister. She now has a public-facing role promoting girls' education in her community and has a young daughter. By 2018, Jyoti had patched up with her boyfriend of eight years, but she told him that she would not let herself be hurt this time, even if he broke off or cheated. She told me, though, that "even though I love him, I cannot let on." Instead, she hoped that her as-yet-unknown prospective husband would have an extended family where sisters-in-law would provide emotional care, because she expected her future husband to cheat (see also Osella 2012). In 2018, Priyanka told me that she had broken up with her married boyfriend and that, in retrospect, she regarded her pursuit of love with him as a waste of time. Priyanka's reflection taught me that enjoyment in Ghaziabad allowed young women to overcome the heartbreaks over the pursuit of love (*pyaar*) leading to marriage. My respondents used enjoyment to play with marital norms, meeting their aspirations for middle-class pleasures before entering an arranged marriage decided by their families. Yet they also learned that love comes in many forms, and that they would find it again.

Love as a practice, a narration, and emotional experience for middle-class young women in Ghaziabad is malleable, creative, and often improvised. Forms of love shift over time, often from one to another, for example, from love as madness for Priyanka, to love as labor, and finally to love as enjoyment. Structures of caste, class, and gender bear down on women like her, conditioning the possibilities of these multifaceted forms of love (see also Vohra 2022). For middle-class young women in Ghaziabad like Priyanka, Nagma and Jyoti, the death

of the erotic in their lives through divorces, abandonment, or widowhood is one of the most dangerous things because it forecloses the possibility of exploring other enjoyments, and the imagination of possible alternatives (*khawaishein mar jaati hain*) to loveless marriages, divorces, or widowhood. Through enjoyment, my interlocutors tried to preserve their access to worlds in which kindling desire could offer pleasure when marriage did not. These enjoyments were temporary, done in the face of hopelessness. Yet as the experiences of Nagma, Jyoti, and Priyanka show here, they might be enablers of a broader reshaping of ideals of love in a prospective marriage. This might happen even when marriages remain restricted within caste and religious communities and arranged by parents. Crucially, however, enjoyment as described here also changed the norms of seeking and engaging in pleasurable relationships outside of marriages in urbanizing Ghaziabad. In this way, the rules of monogamy might be slowly eroding over time, even as middle-class cultures continue to privilege marrying up. New urban spaces such as the malls provide an opportunity for middle-class consumption and play, but they limit the possibilities of fully reimagining love otherwise.

## CONCLUSION

Why do women cultivate hope for love even when they know that their practices will not result in desirable changes in urban Ghaziabad? While scholars have broadly argued that love acts as a social force that might defuse hatred (Bose 2017, 272) between castes and religions (cf. Ahearn 2001; Das 1995; Mody 2008; Maqsood 2021; Rapport 2018) in South Asia and beyond, young women's experiences of love discussed here taught them that love (*pyaar* or *dilwala pyaar*) did not lead to a desirable happy-ever-after. Therefore, they cultivated and nourished desires—for men and women—in urban spaces to *enjoy* the aesthetic consumption pleasures of the city despite their family's restrictions on the pursuit of love. My interlocutors narrated enjoyment as a form of love (*dimaagwala pyaar*).

This essay has explored companionate practices that resemble or even draw on love (*pyaar*) as depicted in mass-media representations as those of Bollywood, but do not expect love or marriage at the end. These practices, I have argued, allow people to reconceptualize love and intimacy in their lives. The cases here presented point toward the shaping of new forms of love beyond the structural and epistemic violence of patriarchal heteronormative marriage and moral panics such as "Love Jihad." They challenge the injunctions on short-term relationships in contemporary social theory where sexual relationships, which come with

an imperative to “enjoy” (Badiou and Rouselle 2019, 15), are argued to have commercialized intimacy, damaging stable and enduring intimacies to mark an “end of love” (Illouz 2021). Enjoyment as a short-lived kind of love acts as a site for transgression, hope, and despair, and ultimately, as we have seen, for direct changes in these particular women’s lives.

The discussions and practices of love in this article critically extend contemporary discussions in anthropology in at least three ways. First, the essay engages the multiple kinds of love that allow women to work past the idealization of love (*pyaar*) as a single thing, a pure feeling of care and concern that would lead to marriage. It shows how women who occupy particular socioeconomic positions in urbanized areas in India discover alternate forms of love to resolve ongoing tension between the pursuit of pleasure, on the one hand, and expected middle-class comfort, on the other. These forms of love (enjoyment) are defiantly presentist and generate possibilities of emancipation, pleasure, and hope for short-term goals, allowing for a reconsideration of Berlant’s “cruel optimism” argument by highlighting the creativity, malleability, and playful forms of love that arise precisely to circumvent its cruelties. The essay’s second contribution has been to rethink the cruel optimism of a stagnant kind of love from the perspective of my Dalit and Muslim interlocutors, who often lack a voice in shaping influential theories from elsewhere (Rege 1995; Shah 2022). Third, the article has shown how embodied gestures of sexual desire in the context of societal and embodied repression can actively bend the rules by creating recognitions and misrecognitions of everyday acts. Such a play disconnects women’s acts such as intentionally smiling, waving, or winking from otherwise overdetermined associations with the pursuit of love as marriage or sexual encounter. Freud called these playful acts “parapraxis” or “the defective performance of certain purposive acts” (Kohn 2013, 172–74). Such spontaneous play with associative chains of thought, for example, the unlinking of a naughty wink from its progression to love and to marriage, proliferate and resonate through society in this urbanizing part of India. They also allow my interlocutors to rejoice in the self-affirmation, care, and pleasure that desire can enable, even when it does not lead to love or marriage.

The micro-practices of erotic play explored in this essay shed light on anthropological discussions on the connection between everyday practices and larger moral worlds. While enjoyment focuses on the pleasures of the present, it urged me to look away from the end goals (cf. Mahmood 2004 for a different kind of self-actualization). Analyzing enjoyment required my attention as

an ethnographer to the relational possibilities inherent in the present in places where the future or “not yet” seems overdetermined by enduring structures, particularly for women. This ethnographic attention to enjoyment in/of the present by Nagma, Jyoti, and Priyanka revealed how everyday moral contestations about the “near future,” such as what clothes to wear or whether to laugh or pout at men, create conditions of possibility (and acceptability) of new forms of sociality, even as this present keeps threatened by the possibility of subsumption by normalizing ideologies.

### ABSTRACT

*Some young middle-class women in Ghaziabad have little hope that love will lead to a desirable future. Therefore, they kindle desire in casual encounters that they describe as “enjoyment” and cultivate a sensibility of living in the moment. Enjoyment departs from love (pyaar) as depicted in mass media like Bollywood that leads to marriage. Instead, through enjoyment, college-attending women move through fantasies of love (pyaar) leading to marriage under conditions of urbanization, the rise of women’s education, and pervasive unemployment. In the process, they uncouple flirting and erotic play from its progression to love (pyaar) or marriage. In so doing, women ironically and unintentionally create an alternate form of love (enjoyment). This version of love is playful, creative, and fun. It allows women to access pleasure and to enact a version of love not latched to marriage. By paying attention to these alternate forms of love, this essay shows how women work past the “cruel optimism” of love, reconstituting it as a site for self-affirmation, pleasure, and play. [love; cruel optimism; hopelessness; play; enjoy; class; urban]*

### NOTES

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1. Marriage is often accompanied by bodily transformations for women, where they are encouraged to put on weight ahead of childbearing.
2. In this essay I focus on *pyaar* in its romantic variety. However, *pyaar* is also used to describe the feelings of self-less care of mothers toward children, and vice versa. It is also used in letter-writing to friends to denote the English equivalent of “dear” (e.g., *pyaare*).
3. Women discussed in this article are pursuing their first marriage, come from middle-class backgrounds, and are college-educated, which in the urban context of Ghaziabad stands for class differences. I intentionally avoid the adjectives of *unmarried* and *single* in this essay, because while *unmarried* constructs women’s lives in relation to marriage, *single* constitutes a broader category that includes widowed and divorced women.
4. Such marriages are referred to as love-marriage (Mody 2008).

5. Such marriages are sometimes called love-cum-arranged marriages.
6. Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy of ascetic love that diminishes the erotic has parallels in early Buddhist scriptures (De Silva 1970).
7. "Marriages" here refers to various forms of living and childcare arrangements (polygynous; with humans and also non-humans) that were present in India during the pre-colonial, colonial eras. Even in present-day India these marriages exist besides legally recognized marriages.
8. Often, love (*pyaar*) was only experienced in second or third "marriages" not registered legally (Sen 1999). These living arrangements were common among the lower castes in the precolonial period and were delegitimized by colonial and postcolonial laws in favor of conjugal stability and monogamy (Basu 2015; Sen, Biswas, and Dhawan 2011). Customary divorces common among the lower castes were referred to as "enjoyments" during the constitutional debates on divorce among Hindus in the immediate post-independence period (Basu 2015, 63).
9. Education during the colonial period constituted a site of reform, undertaken to produce dutiful wives and mothers restricted to the domestic sphere. Yet education as a site of reform for women's agentive capacities also produced new patriarchies (Chatterjee 1994; John 2005). In Ghaziabad and its surroundings, women's education is also meant to act as a backup financial option in case women's marriages end in divorce.
10. Marriage is often the only source for women's property rights in India (Basu 2015), prompting many to pursue love to lead to marriage. But men too depend on their parents' wealth for sustenance, making marriage against the parents' wishes an unattainable aspiration in this context of unemployment.
11. A materialist account of women's pursuit of love in postcolonial India suggests that women pursue love leading to marriage because legal marriages allow women to make a claim on the husband's property, which makes for a powerful motivator in a context in which jobs for educated women are scarce, divorces high, and where people face excommunication for going against the family in inter-caste or inter-religious relationships. However, this reality only provides a partial explanation, because young women like Priyanka were prepared to entertain live-in relationships over marriages. These relationships provide limited financial safety. Women's investment, instead, was in relationships outside of the home because these relationships provide affective relief, amelioration, and hope in a context in which dowry and marital negotiations were ever present in their homes, and their domestic lives were saturated with household chores and taunts by siblings.
12. My respondents often evoked this historical understanding by recounting how their parents too had loves outside of marriages, often across religious and caste boundaries ("Didi, can you love two people at once?" they often asked me. They highlighted too how these living arrangements were allowed before the colonial government delegitimized them. They pointed out that the wealthy in present-day India, such as the erstwhile chief minister of the state, Mulayam Singh Yadav, live in these arrangements with multiple wives without legally marrying them. Young people assumed that these relationships were based on love (see also Vanita 2005, a work that claims that people often refer to sexual relationships in idioms of love).
13. The preference for the English word *enjoyment* over related terms such as *Ishq* indicates urban sophistication and creates an emotional expectation of a controlled emotional intensity over passionate burning registered in these older forms of love (Orsini 2006; Mian 2019). I am aware of the historicity of the term *enjoyment*, in that colonial expeditions used *enjoyment* to describe intimate relationships that did not match the expectations of Christian monogamous marriages.
14. My presence served as a mirror for my respondents' pursuits, and therefore I approached them with care. While hanging out in the city, I served as a responsive audience for their jokes, emotional support, and sexual knowledge, and in the process, I unexpectedly became a sounding board for my interlocutors' resounding refutations of conservative ideas (especially around marriage).

15. My interviews drew equally from Gurjar or Jat (landholding castes), Dalit (lower castes), and upper-caste (historically privileged) Muslim and Hindu women.
16. I frequently watched Bollywood films with my interlocutors, such as *Mastizaade* (2016, dir. Milap Zaveri), *Pyaar ka PUNCHAMA* (2011, dir. Luv Ranjan), and *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015, dir. Zoya Akhtar), among others.
17. Jobs in Ghaziabad for women tend to be poorly paid, insecure, and often include sexual harassment (Awal 2021; cf. Islam 2020).
18. Jyoti's boyfriend, for whom she attempted suicide and whom she wanted to marry, belonged to the Jatav caste. However, as this was enjoyment, she sought well-off men from dominant caste communities, such as Jat and Gurjars.
19. Men from these backgrounds depended on their families for income, married young, and were often dissatisfied with their own marriages, therefore sought opportunities for enjoying.
20. The ethnographic film *No City for Women* (directed by Rangan Chakravarty, 2023) depicts a darker side of these relationships where expectations of sex with older kinsmen are forced on younger brides.
21. In Latin America and the United States, malls have been researched as hyperregulated spaces in which the marketing and selling of goods takes place through heteronormative scripts of intimacy and desire, offering women the opportunity to enter and be playful with heteronormative codes through flirting and play (Dávila 2016). In my research, malls in this part of India played a similar role (see also Ghertner 2015).
22. My interlocutors gained mastery over the various moods of love by an experiential immersion in pleasure and play. Historically, love is thought to be used to cultivate a wider set of emotional repertoires. See Schofield 2021, 187, for late Mughal era music where *ragas* of desire are considered to be the most important in evoking a range of emotions, such as a grief, separation. See Pollock 2016 for *rasas* of love in Sanskrit literature; moods of love in Hansen 1991 for Sufi Islam; and Mian 2019 for intensity of *Ishq* in Deobandi Islam.

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