

CFPR SEMINAR SERIES



March 20, 2026
12:00 – 1:30PM



Chairperson:
A/P Kriti Vikram
CFPR Co-Director
Sociology & Anthropology



NUS AS7
The Shaw Foundation Building
Level 6 Seminar Room, 5 Arts Link
Singapore 117570



<https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/seminars-workshops>

150 Years of Spouse-Seeking From the Times of India's Matrimonial Columns

This study adopts a novel historical and computational perspective to investigate evolving patterns of spouse-seeking in India, a context traditionally centered on family-arranged unions. We analyze a unique corpus of 26,590 matrimonial columns identified from over 1.2 million classified ads scraped from the Times of India archive, spanning 1860 to 2011. These data provide a valuable source to explore long-term trends in partner-seeking behavior among Indian middle-and-upper classes. We employ Natural Language Processing (NLP) and topic modeling to track the changing salience of attributes like caste, education, language, religion, and appearance through both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) approaches. Our findings reveal a re-articulation of social boundaries redefining the nature of endogamy. First, we find a sustained increase in the salience of individualistic attributes, specifically “looks” (physical appearance) and “nature” (personality), which remain the most dominant covariates across the entire period. Second, these individualistic preferences are gendered: the rising importance of physical appearance is a premium overwhelmingly sought in women. Third, we uncover a significant re-articulation of social boundaries, where the declining importance of caste-specificity is paralleled by increasing salience of macro-level identities, namely language and religion, suggesting a redrawing of in-group boundaries. This study contributes fresh insights to the discourse on Indian marriage, quantifying the interplay between the reinforcement of macro-level communal identities, the strategic loosening of micro-level caste boundaries, and the rise of modern, individualistic preferences among influential and trend-setting demographic segments of society.

Speaker

Associate Professor Luca Maria Pesando
New York University Abu Dhabi

Luca Maria Pesando is Associate Professor of Social Research and Public Policy at New York University Abu Dhabi (NYU-AD). Before joining NYU-AD, he was an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Demography in the Department of Sociology and Centre on Population Dynamics, McGill University. His research lies in the areas of social, economic, and digital demography. He is interested in issues of family poverty, inequality, gender, social stratification, intra- and inter-generational processes, technology adoption, and interactions between life-cycle events and human capital accumulation. His overarching research aim is to produce better knowledge on the link between family change, gender, and educational inequalities in areas where these dynamics are changing rapidly and scant research is available.

