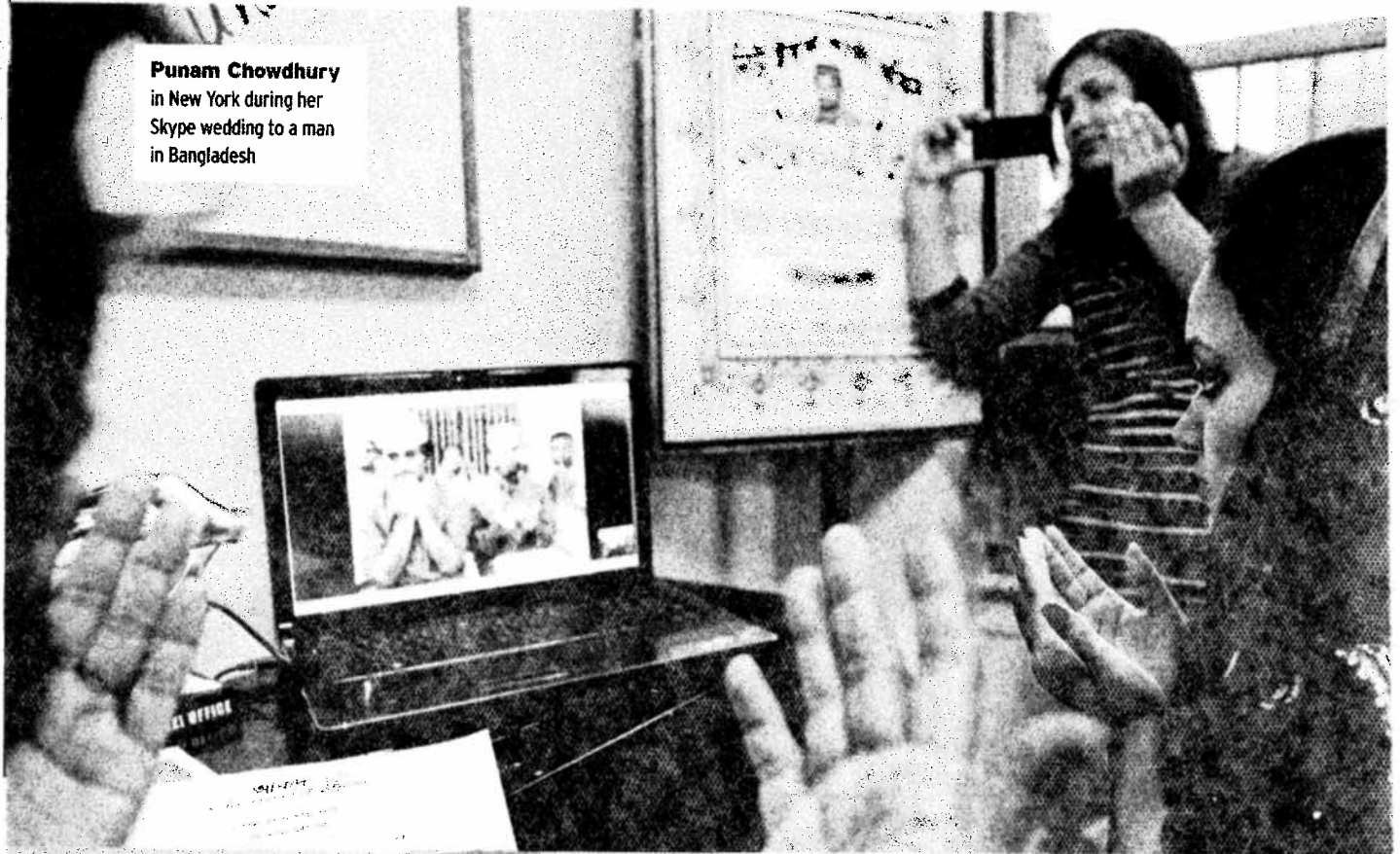


You May Now Kiss the Computer

In the latest challenge to traditional ideas about marriage, more couples are saying "I do" online BY SARAH MASLIN NIR IN NEW YORK

Punam Chowdhury
in New York during her
Skype wedding to a man
in Bangladesh



With a red embroidered veil draped over her dark hair, Punam Chowdhury held her breath as her fiancé said the words that would make them husband and wife. After she echoed them, they were married. Guests erupted in applause; the bride and groom traded bashful smiles.

Just then, the Internet connection cut out, and the ceremony abruptly ended.

Normally one of the most intimate moments two people can share, this wedding took place from opposite sides of the globe over Skype. Chowdhury, 21, an American citizen, was in a mosque in New York. Her new husband, Tanvir Ahmmed, 31, was in his living room with a Shariah (Islamic law) judge in his native Bangladesh.

Such proxy marriages—legal arrangements that allow couples who are apart to wed, even if one or both spouses are not present—date back centuries. One of the most famous was between King Louis XVI of France and Marie Antoinette, who were first married in her native Austria in April 1770 in his absence; a face-to-face wedding took place a month later at the Palace of Versailles in France.*

Proxy marriages are widespread in Muslim countries, where the Koran has long been interpreted to explicitly endorse it.

In the U.S., it's been relatively rare. Only a few states permit proxy marriage, and most require one partner to be in the military. But it's now on the rise, especially in immigrant communities. The U.S. generally recognizes foreign marriages if they are legally conducted abroad and don't break any laws here. The Chowdhury-Ahmed wedding technically "took place" in Bangladesh, where it was legally registered.

George Andrews of Proxy Marriage Now!, a company in Fayetteville, North Carolina, that arranges such unions worldwide, says that technology like Skype is driving the growth of proxy marriages. Andrews says his seven-year-old company now arranges about 400 to 500 proxy weddings a year, many of which don't involve people in the military.

Immigration Fraud?

Andrews says couples choose proxy marriages for a variety of reasons. Some use them to get around local laws, like those in Israel and other countries that recognize mixed-religion marriages but won't perform them. Couples who live in different countries may seek marriage to pave the way for a visa or citizenship for a spouse. And proxy marriages make it easy for immigrants to marry people from their homelands without the expense of matchmaking trips abroad.

But the increasingly popular practice is raising concerns—primarily that it may enable marriage fraud, which is already a challenge for immigration authorities.

Anyone applying for American citizenship through marriage must be interviewed by the Department of Homeland Security or the State Department. Officials at those agencies say that marriages taking place thousands of miles apart over the Internet would probably raise a red flag. But asking spouses about proxy marriages is not

planning. "I think [online marriage] takes away from the meaning of it."

In some ways, however, proxy marriage is only the latest in a series of technological and social changes that have upended traditional notions of marriage and romance. Before the Internet, most Americans met their future spouses in school or in other social settings; today, the majority of single Americans say they've tried Internet dating sites like Match.com or eHarmony. Priests and rabbis have traditionally pre-

Proxy marriages date back centuries. The Internet just makes them a lot easier.



yet a routine question, mainly because the practice is still so new in the U.S.

Some immigration officials say they were unaware it was even happening, and that they haven't taken extra precautions to make sure these marriages weren't misused to secure citizenship.

There are concerns beyond immigration fraud. Archi Pyati works at the Sanctuary for Families in New York, which helps battered women. She says the center has handled cases involving women, many from West Africa, who were married by proxy without their consent, or as children. Some women are brought into the U.S. through such marriages only to find themselves in the hands of sex traffickers.

"Part of the reason for having the two people come and appear before a priest or a judge is to make sure it is a freely chosen thing," says Adam Candeub, a professor at Michigan State University College of Law. "There are some problems with willy-nilly allowing anyone around the world to marry."

And some people oppose the practice on more-traditional grounds.

"A wedding begins your new life together, not apart," says Angela Troia, owner of The Wedding Company, which sells invitations and offers wedding

planning. "I think [online marriage] takes away from the meaning of it." sided over marriage ceremonies, but nearly a third of the couples recently interviewed by the wedding site TheKnot.com said they were married by friends or family members who were ordained online.

Defining Marriage

And the very definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman is also changing. Nine states plus Washington, D.C., have legalized same-sex marriage. Later this spring, the Supreme Court will weigh in on two cases that may decide whether same-sex couples have a constitutional right to marry.

But for Chowdhury and Ahmed, the young bride and groom in New York and Bangladesh, their proxy wedding felt full of the gravity and tradition of other weddings. The giggling pair even pretended to feed each other forkfuls of cake through their computer screens. Chowdhury noted that her aunt had married in a similar way, long before the Internet—by telephone.

Peering from the screen of a laptop, Ahmed agreed. "This is my lawful wife," he said.

At the last word, his bride squealed with joy. •

Sarah Maslin Nir is a reporter for The Times.

* Things didn't work out so well for either of them. In 1793, they were beheaded during the French Revolution.