No longer caste in stone

Middle-class marriage preferences suggest a blurring of caste taboos and boundaries

THE recent death connected to an inter-caste marriage in Dharampur, Tamil Nadu, is a timely reminder of caste prejudices in our society. It highlighted the central role of marriage in reproducing caste boundaries. It also masks a developing, even encouraging phenomenon—an increasing interest in inter-caste marriage among those seeking conventionally arranged marriages. Our research, which relied upon matrimonial ad-based experiments, shows that a desire for upward mobility within the middle class is driving many to cross the very caste barriers that have divided Indians for centuries.

Despite increasing urbanisation, living and education standards, conventional wisdom holds that attitudes toward intermarriage remain largely traditional and people only marry within their own caste group. When individuals and their families choose marriage partners from their own caste, they perpetuate caste divisions. This is why social reformers viewed intermarriage as a solution to caste divisions in our society.

Enter economic liberalisation. Since liberalisation, the urban middle class, historically made up of upper castes, has become more diverse. Although lower castes are still underrepresented, their numbers have increased gradually. While diversity doesn’t necessarily mean a more inclusive society, our research finds that the same economic opportunities that have allowed for the financial success of lower castes have opened the door to increasing social integration through intermarriage.

To better understand intermarriage, we studied the preferences of Dalit and upper caste women in the urban, middle class, arranged-marriage markets in three states: Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. We examined women’s preferences because they adopt the caste of their husbands and stand to either gain or lose caste through intermarriage.

We contacted prospective brides with matrimonial interests from three similar men who matched on family background, age, height, skin colour and education. All three grooms were from upper-middle-class backgrounds. But each belonged to a different caste category: Dalit, backward and upper caste, respectively.

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What did we learn? Contrary to popular belief, 62 per cent of our 1,070 Dalit and upper caste participants were willing to look beyond their own caste category while responding to matrimonial interests. Our interviews with women in the marriage market indicate that this willingness might be even greater if prospective brides could make decisions independent of their families. These findings reflect a trend we found in newspapers matrimonial ads placed in dailies published in Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata; whereas in the 1980s, 28 per cent of ads contained a specific request for a partner of a particular caste, by 2010, only 19 per cent of ads contained such a request.

Why are people willing to cross caste boundaries in the marriage market? We found that in a highly status-conscious society, many people approach the marriage market with a view to upgrade either their economic class or caste status. But, like any other market, the marriage market works on the principle of exchange; to get something, one has to be able to offer something. An upper caste, middle class woman could use her high caste status to upgrade her economic status by marrying a wealthier lower caste man. Similarly, a Dalit woman from a wealthy family could hope to caste status upgrade through marriage by leveraging her class status. Although an expression of matrimonial interest does not necessarily translate into a marriage, even considering an inter-caste match represents social change. After all, to consider someone as a life partner, one has to acknowledge the person and their family as respectable.

Even though interest in intermarriage is high among our respondents, not surprisingly, upper castes are more reluctant to intermarry than Dalits. 71 per cent of Dalit and only 54 per cent of upper caste women responded to expressions of interest from outside their own caste. We also found that the shadow of caste-related stigma persists; the Dalit profile was the least likely to elicit a response from potential brides, reminding us that social transformation takes time. But there is no denying that today, a desire to move up the status ladder is challenging the significance of caste.

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