Intercaste Marriage and Social Dynamics in India: A Critique

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This critique identifies the adverse social dynamics, acting overtly and covertly against the expected growth of intercaste marriages in India, despite the forces of modernisation, increased education and employment of women and increased social interaction of young people of different castes. The nexus between the adaptations of the caste system to the needs of the young people and the continuation of both arranged marriage and caste endogamy is elaborated. The emergence of opposition from casteist and communal forces to intermarriage is also noted.

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INTRODUCTION

Intermarriage lies at the heart of intergroup relations. Increased rates of intermarriage in a society are considered a measure of assimilation of different groups (Pagnini and Morgan, 1990). But in Indian society, even though a multitude of castes and sub-castes existed together for centuries, they were not assimilated because of the rigid caste system. In addition, the lack of strict enforcement of registration of all marriages makes it very difficult to state with any certainty the prevailing rates of intercaste marriages in Indian society. An increase in intermarriages in large cities may not necessarily indicate an increasing trend in intercaste marriage. On the contrary, there have been media reports about the active, often hostile and aggressive attacks by fundamentalist forces on the efforts of young people to intermarry (Manushi, 1990; Shivakumar, 1990). In a recent study, postgraduate students of a University situated in a rural area have expressed the opinion that due to strong caste feelings in villages and small towns, intercaste marriage leads to intercaste conflicts and clashes. They substantiated their views
by quoting instances from their own villages and small towns (Krishnaswamy, 1996). It was also found that the greater the social distance between the castes of the two young people intending to marry, the more intense and aggressive were the efforts to prevent the intermarriage.

Apart from media reports and attitudinal studies there appears to be a severe paucity of research which can throw light on the prevalence of intermarriage and problems of those who intermarried and those who intend to intermarry. Moreover studies which were comprehensive and holistic in their approach were very few and far between (Deshpande, 1969; Kannan, 1961).

Likewise there has been little research on the influence of migration on the pattern of selection of marriage partner in general and on the prevalence of intercaste marriage in particular. Studies on the effect of urbanisation as reflected in people's attitudes towards intercaste marriage, show that the urban respondents were comparatively more favourable towards intercaste marriages than the rural respondents. However, these studies do not show the extent to which favourable attitudes could be attributed to migration from rural and small towns to urban areas and metropolitan cities (Anant, 1972; Banerjee and Banerjee, 1978; Banerjee and Choudhary, 1988; Krishnaswamy, 1996; Reddy, 1984).

Even interstate migration of urban families does not appear to have made any perceptible impact on the prevalence of intercaste marriage. It is common for such families to search for a bride or groom for their offspring in their own state and invariably from their own caste. If a sizeable number of families belonging to one's caste exists in the state to which the family has migrated, the selection becomes limited to this small group.

It is interesting to note that even highly educated Indians who have migrated to the west are found to stick to their own caste when it comes to the selection of a marriage partner. Few studies on matrimonial advertisements by Non-Resident Indians who have migrated to the United States have revealed that these advertisements invariably state the caste and even sub-caste of the advertiser implying that the choice of marriage-partner is restricted to the advertiser's caste or sub-caste (Sharda, 1990). It is a common observation that many young people who have migrated to Western countries and are trying to become immigrants, usually visit India to select their marriage partners, often within their own caste or sub-caste, and have arranged marriages.
Thus, migration does not seem to have made any considerable impact on the prevalence of intermarriage.

In this context, it is necessary to examine the influence of both the Hindu Marriage Act and Special Marriage Act on the prevalence of intercaste marriage. The former legalised the marriage between two Hindus irrespective of their differential caste backgrounds, and the latter made it possible for any two willing adults to marry irrespective of caste, community and nationality. A number of studies conducted during the 1960s and 1970s found that these laws acted as catalysts to intercaste marriage (Corwin, 1977; Kannan, 1961; Sarkar, 1972). These studies point out that the legislations which do not require parental consent for marriage have provided a psychological weapon to young people with which to counter parental opposition. But it must be noted that legislation, at its best, can only facilitate those couples who make up their mind to intermarry, and does not automatically trigger the process of intercaste marriage.

Thus, in the present social context, it is necessary to identify, examine and understand the factors and processes which hinder intercaste marriages in our society, and also devise ways and means of fighting these forces. It may also throw some light on possible ways of supporting and promoting intercaste marriages within the framework of existing adverse social realities.

CASTE ENDOGAMY: CORNERSTONE OF CASTE

When one looks at the institution of marriage in the Indian context, what strikes one is the near universal practice of arranged marriage and rigid adherence to caste endogamy. Of these, endogamy is considered the cornerstone of the caste system which ensured both the purity of caste and social stratification based on caste (Anant, 1972; Ghurye, 1969; Karve, 1958; Kolenda, 1978; Paranjape, 1970; Rao and Rao, 1980). Even in cosmopolitan cities where there are no caste restrictions in social interactions, and where caste practices have to be restricted to the realm of the home, it is caste endogamy which has sustained, perpetuated and reinforced the caste system. According to Ambedkar (Bambawale and Ramanamma, 1980) caste is the gravitating force of the Hindu social world and to ensure its continuity, the first step which the caste took was to tighten its circle by caste endogamy which prescribed the ban on intermarriages.

Thus, the edifice of the caste system is standing on caste endogamy, which in its turn is perpetuated and strengthened continuously by
the institution of arranged marriage, which is almost universally practised by all castes, creeds, and religions in Indian society. Arranged marriages act as an effective mechanism to ensure that marriages take place within the caste, and that romantic attractions do not interfere with the endogamous principle, thereby maintaining the caste stratification.

ARRANGED MARRIAGE AND DOWRY

Goode (1959) listed different societal measures to control love before it can appear. Of these, child marriage, kinship marriage and social segregation of girls and women operate to a considerable extent in rural areas and small towns even today. Though most of these controls have become obsolete among the educated urban middle and higher economic classes due to industrialisation, spread of education, modernisation, increased education and employment of women, one finds that most of the marriages in Indian society, even among the urban and highly educated sections of society, are arranged by elders within one's caste or even within one's sub-caste. The tenacity of the institution of caste endogamous arranged marriage was often attributed to the following factors:

- Marriage is still considered an area in which the influence of traditional values and social customs on the individual is strong. A part of this influence is explained by arranged marriage (Desai, 1993; Paranjape, 1970).
- Marriage is still considered primarily an alliance between two families (Ahuja, 1992; Anant, 1972; Kurian, 1974; Raman, 1983).
- Marriage is largely viewed as a sacrament among the Hindus. Deemed a permanent bond, young people did not want to take the risk of self-choice in mate selection (Cormack, 1961; Kapur, 1974; Rao and Rao, 1980; Ross, 1961; Upreti and Upreti, 1992).
- Caste endogamous arranged marriage is a matter of convenience in a number of ways and it also offers a social sanction and feeling of security (Paranjape, 1970; Kishwar, 1994).

Moreover, young people seem to value the wisdom and advice of elders the time tested method of mate selection and arranged marriage (Cormack, 1961; Umadevi, Venkataramaih and Srinivasulu, 1992; Upreti and Upreti, 1982). Thus, despite the spread of education, industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation which have increased opportunities for young people of both sexes from different castes to socially interact and fall in love, the number of intermarriages
or rather the number of young people who dare cross the caste lines to marry is still very small.

Several studies carried out on trends and expectations about arranged versus love marriage (self-arranged) revealed that a majority of college students showed preference for marriages arranged by parents or joint arrangement by parents and themselves (Rao and Rao, 1980; Shah, 1975; Upreti and Upreti, 1982). Shah (1975) concluded from his study that the self-choice marriage is still a rare possibility for the urban educated and his conclusions hold good even after two decades. According to Desai (1993) before the youth even exercise their right to select their respective spouses, their freedom is curtailed by the very process of initiation and consideration of proposals by the parents.

The ever increasing prevalence of dowry has added a more powerful dimension which had made arranged marriage a more attractive proposition to young men in search of social and economic advancement in today's highly competitive society.

**GROWING CASTEISM**

While considering all these factors influencing mate selection, one cannot overlook the way in which both caste endogamy and thereby caste solidarity are being strengthened by the magnitude of growing casteism which is damaging to integrated secular and democratic society. Growing casteism has been working against intercaste alliances indirectly through caste associations, caste journals and caste socials fostering caste loyalty and caste consciousness among young men, by providing them with a feeling of security of caste affiliation through helping them in securing education and employment and demanding loyalty to their castes (Ahuja, 1992; Ghurye, 1969; Kuppuswamy, 1986; Sinha, 1960).

As such caste endogamous arranged marriage appears to remain unaffected even though some empirical studies have reported slight changes in mate selection:

- Increased demand of the young for more choice and freedom in mate selection (Cormack, 1961; Rao and Rao, 1980).
- Increased participation of young people in finalising the selection of mate from among those who were selected and approved by elders and parents.
- In the case of some castes, fusion of sub-castes resulting in a larger endogamous group, thereby providing a wide circle of choice of mate (Kolenda, 1978; Ghurye, 1969).
Hence it was obvious that these changes have no drastic effect on caste endogamous arranged marriage. It must also be noted that all these changes have taken place within the gambit of the caste system. Thus, it becomes clear that the caste system had evaded yet another possible assault of urbanisation, migration, industrialisation, increased education and employment of women, and so on, on its core that is, caste endogamy, by making adaptations to the slowly changing needs of young people, has made caste endogamous marriages more attractive to them by providing both security and support of kin-group and caste affiliation along with dowry.

Sociologists and social psychologists alike have pointed out how the caste system has adapted itself to the demands of social changes brought by democracy, social legislation, equal rights enshrined in the constitution, higher education, industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation by making the caste Hindus 'ritually neutral' in their social interaction with other caste members and in their strict adherence to the principle of caste endogamy (Ahuja, 1992; Kolenda, 1978; Kuppuswamy, 1986; Sinha, 1960). Sociologists and social reformers advocate intercaste marriage for the mitigation of social evils of caste and the eradication of the caste system.

Ahuja (1992), in his analysis of the future of caste, has pointed out that even though caste may shed many of its features, there is no trace of the caste system loosening its grip on the Indian society. Instead, there is a growing tendency among most castes to strengthen their solidarity by fusion of sub-castes and formation of caste associations, thereby achieving the numerical strength necessary for extracting enough dough for political, educational, employment and economic opportunities and gain. This has led to keen competition among various castes with resultant casteism. Casteism, in its turn, has led to increased intercaste tensions and conflicts. Thus, a vicious circle of casteism and intercaste conflict is in operation in today's society.

Many social scientists are unanimous in their opinion that the threat posed by the caste system today is that of growing casteism (Ahuja, 1992; Ghurye, 1969; Kuppuswamy, 1986; Sinha, 1960). The caste loyalty, strong casteism, even what is denoted as caste patriotism (Ghurye, 1969) is growing and gaining strength, thereby posing a threat to the proper functioning of democracy, secularism, political unity, social progress and social justice. Casteism has led to increased intercaste tensions and intercaste clashes, with consequent damage to
social harmony especially in those regions where castes have become polarised in their fight for political power and economic gain.

Against this backdrop, to what extent the communal and castiestic forces can actively prevent intermarriage is another dimension that merits close examination. Most of the couples who intend to cross the line of caste or community, marry under the Special Marriage Act to circumvent or to counter familial/parental opposition. Marrying under this Act requires that the couple intending to marry give names and addresses. This practice can become a convenient tool for casteist or communal forces to harass such couples. Ruth (1990) in her article on the Special Marriage Act, maintains that certain casteism and communal groups in Delhi try to prevent those who want to intermarry under this Act, especially if they belong to two different communities. They were able to do this by regularly inspecting the notices with the names and addresses of the couples intending to marry. These groups were known to cause trouble either by trying to dissuade the couple from marrying and or by alerting powerful members of the community and family, who in turn, did their utmost to prevent such a couple from marrying. These methods were reported to range from dissuading the concerned individuals to kidnapping and even killing them. It was also only a tiny minority availed of the provision to intermarry under the Special Marriage Act as is evident from the figures for 1989 only 444 marriages were conducted under this Act in Delhi, which has a population of about eight million (Ruth, 1990). It may be suggested that an alternate method may be used in place of public display of names and addresses. Communal and casteist fundamentalism which is eroding democratic values has also started attacking the private lives and choices of individuals. As early as in 1960, Sinha pointed out that casteism has permeated not only the political and economic fields but had spread among university students. Not much appears to have changed since then, as found by a recent report (Pathak, 1994) based on a MARG survey conducted among 365 college students from eight cities, of which four were metropolitan cities. This survey revealed that even in a cosmopolitan campus like the Delhi University, there has been an upsurge of caste and community oriented groups forming their own associations.

Such casteism has dangerous implications to the growth of national consciousness. Ghurye (1969) states: It is the spirit of caste patriotism which engenders opposition to other castes and creates an unhealthy atmosphere for the growth of national consciousness.
Schmidt (cf.: Vaidya, 1989) also pointed out that one of the most tragic consequences of the caste system is that it prevents the development of general national consciousness.

CONCLUSION

Thus, in the present social context of increasing casteism, increasing prevalence of dowry and severe competition for jobs it is no wonder if young people turn to their respective castes for their social and economic advancement. Under these circumstances, they may try to keep their caste affiliation unsullied by strictly following caste endogamy. Many prejudices and myths against mixed marriage contribute to this process (Krishnaswamy, 1996).

A recent study found that postgraduate students were only moderately in favour of intercaste marriage. During the group interviews, many students were found to have a clear cognisance of social forces which are adverse to intermarriage and expressed the view that religious leaders, organisations of prominent citizens and intermarried couples should promote intercaste marriages and support intermarried couples (Krishnaswamy, 1996).

Today, social scientists and reformers, interested in promoting intercaste harmony and in mitigating the evils of the caste system through intercaste marriages, face the daunting task of fighting adverse social forces and finding ways and means of promoting and supporting intercaste marriages.

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