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The Role of Family and Community in Accepting Inter-Caste Marriages in India

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Abstract

Inter-caste marriages in India continue to face social resistance despite constitutional support and legal provisions like the Special Marriage Act, 1954. Deep-rooted caste hierarchies and traditional norms make such unions a matter of familial and communal concern rather than personal choice. This research paper examines the critical role of families and communities in shaping the acceptance or rejection of inter-caste marriages. While urban areas show increasing tolerance due to education, media exposure, and changing values, rural communities often respond with strong opposition, including emotional pressure, social boycott, and, in extreme cases, honour-based violence. The study incorporates sociological theories and real-life case studies to understand the dynamics of caste, family honour, and social status. It also evaluates the role of legal frameworks, government incentives, and civil society in promoting social change. Overall, the paper reflects on the ongoing tension between tradition and modernity in India's evolving social fabric.

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1. INTRODUCTION

India's caste system, though constitutionally prohibited from promoting discrimination, remains deeply embedded in the social and cultural fabric of the country. Despite over seven decades of legal reform and socio-economic progress, caste continues to influence personal and public life—particularly in matters of marriage. Marriage in India is not merely a union between two individuals but is viewed as a critical alliance between families, communities, and social groups. Within this framework, endogamy—marriage within one's own caste—has historically been the norm and is still strongly preferred.

Inter-caste marriages, although legally permitted under the Special Marriage Act, 1954, are often perceived as violations of traditional values and societal hierarchies. The gap between constitutional ideals and social acceptance is particularly visible in rural regions, where caste identity remains a dominant factor in determining one's social status. Families and local communities act as custodians of tradition, exerting pressure on individuals to conform. These pressures range from emotional blackmail and social boycott to, in extreme cases, acts of honour-based violence. While urbanisation, education, and exposure to modern values have gradually encouraged greater acceptance of inter-caste marriages in cities, such changes are slow and uneven across different regions and social groups. This paper seeks to analyse the role of family and community in either supporting or obstructing inter-caste marriages, highlighting the socio-cultural tensions between tradition and modernity in contemporary India.

➤ Caste and Marriage in Indian Society

Marriage in Indian society is not merely a personal or romantic decision; it is a complex socio-cultural institution deeply influenced by religion, tradition, and caste. For centuries, the caste system has played a defining role in determining who one can marry, with strict social expectations enforcing caste endogamy—marriage within one's own caste or sub-caste. These practices are especially prominent among traditional and rural communities, where the caste identity of a person not only defines their social status but also governs their relationships and networks.

The concept of caste purity, especially among upper castes, fuels the resistance to inter-caste marriages. Caste purity is perceived to maintain the moral, social, and ritualistic status of a family or community. Any breach of these norms—such as marrying outside the caste—is seen as a contamination of lineage, which could bring dishonour and social exclusion. In many communities, especially in northern Indian states like Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh, marrying into a lower caste is considered a grave violation of social codes. This rigid enforcement of caste boundaries has led to significant consequences for individuals who choose to marry across caste lines. Couples often face familial disapproval, coercion, and in some cases, forced separation. Community-level backlash includes public shaming, boycott of the families involved, denial of basic social services, and even physical violence. Honour killings, though legally punishable, still occur in

various parts of India as an extreme form of resistance to inter-caste unions, particularly when the woman belongs to a higher caste.¹

Despite legal safeguards, such as the Special Marriage Act of 1954, which allows for civil marriage regardless of caste or religion, the social reality remains stark. In practice, many inter-caste couples are forced to elope and seek legal or institutional protection to avoid family backlash. In such cases, the couple's safety often depends on the support of NGOs, human rights organisations, or legal intervention.²

Moreover, the caste dimension in marriage is not only about purity or social order but also about maintaining power and privilege. Dominant castes, particularly in rural areas, fear that inter-caste marriages—especially those involving Dalits or scheduled castes—could lead to a dilution of their authority and erosion of long-held privileges. This fear further strengthens the caste-based opposition to such marriages.

However, societal attitudes are gradually shifting. In urban areas and among the educated middle class, caste considerations in marriage are becoming less rigid. Greater exposure to diverse cultures, co-education, professional mobility, and digital matchmaking platforms are helping individuals cross traditional boundaries. Still, such changes are far from universal and often limited to specific demographics. Caste continues to be a powerful determinant in marital choices in India. While the legal framework permits inter-caste marriages, deeply ingrained social norms, especially within families and communities, continue to exert a powerful influence. The slow transformation in societal attitudes indicates a shift, but significant cultural and structural barriers remain.

2. LITERATURE REVIEWS

Gupta, Dipankar (2000), *Interrogating Caste*. Gupta explores the enduring nature of caste in modern India, focusing on how caste structures remain deeply embedded in social institutions, particularly marriage. He argues that even in urban areas, caste identity subtly shapes marital choices, with family pressure acting as a significant force. The book emphasises how families prioritise social status and community acceptance over individual happiness, reinforcing caste endogamy. Gupta's work is crucial in understanding how social conditioning within families perpetuates caste boundaries.³

Jodhka, Surinder S. (2015), *Caste in Contemporary India*. Jodhka examines caste as a modern social force, rather than a relic of the past. His research highlights how rural communities enforce caste through family structures and collective social behaviour. The book includes field-based evidence showing that families often oppose inter-caste unions to maintain local social capital. Community mechanisms like ostracism and violence further discourage inter-caste marriage. This work provides a valuable sociological framework for analysing the role of both family and community in maintaining caste norms.⁴

Teltumbde, Anand (2010), *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India's Hidden Apartheid*. Teltumbde uses the Khairlanji massacre as a lens to expose the deep-rooted

casteism within Indian families and villages. He argues that the murders of Dalit family members were not isolated incidents, but part of a systemic pattern of caste violence—often condoned or supported by the community. His work highlights how honour, purity, and caste control are enforced not only by communities but by family structures too, making it relevant to the discussion of inter-caste marriages.⁵

Srinivas, M.N. (1962), *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, Srinivas introduced the concept of 'Sanskritization' and explored how caste functions in modern Indian society. He noted that caste hierarchies are often preserved through marriage alliances, controlled primarily by families. His analysis shows that family honour and community reputation are closely tied to endogamy. Though dated, this foundational text still offers insights into why families resist inter-caste marriages and how community surveillance reinforces this resistance.⁶

Fuller, C.J., & Narasimhan, Haripriya (2008), "Companionate Marriage in India: The Changing Marriage System in a Middle-Class Brahman Subcaste." This article explores how middle-class Brahmin families navigate the tension between tradition and modernity in marriage. The authors document a shift toward companionate, love-based marriages—but with caste boundaries mostly intact. Families play a moderating role, sometimes reluctantly accepting inter-caste unions if other social markers (class, education) are favourable. This work is useful for understanding transitional attitudes within elite caste groups.⁷

Satyanarayana, K. (2014), *Inter-Caste Marriage: A Sociological Study of Dalit and Non-Dalit Marriages*. Satyanarayana provides empirical data on Dalit–non-Dalit marriages, documenting social stigma, violence, and family rejection faced by such couples. He highlights that resistance is often more intense when Dalit men marry upper-caste women, exposing gendered aspects of caste honour. The paper emphasises how both family and community actively work to preserve caste purity. It also critiques the state's inability to fully support such couples, making it a highly relevant source for this topic.⁸

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is based on secondary data, collected from scholarly articles, government reports, surveys, news sources, and official websites to analyse societal attitudes and institutional responses to inter-caste marriages in India.

➤ Role of the Family: Resistance and Reconciliation

Families in India play a central role in the decision-making process of marriages. When it comes to inter-caste marriages, they are often the first to express resistance. This opposition can manifest in various emotional, social, and even violent forms. However, a gradual shift is also visible in certain segments of society.

Forms of Resistance:

- **Emotional Pressure:** Parents often resort to emotional manipulation, citing family honour, cultural expectations, and social responsibility. Guilt is used to discourage the individual from marrying outside the caste.
- **Fear of Social Ostracisation:** Families worry about being excluded or criticised by their community, leading to a loss of reputation and social standing.
- **Withdrawal of Financial and Emotional Support:** Parents may disown the couple or withdraw financial support, making it difficult for them to survive independently.
- **Forced Marriage:** In many instances, families quickly arrange a same-caste marriage to prevent the inter-caste union from materialising.
- **Honour-based Violence:** In extreme cases, especially in rural or conservative regions, families have supported or committed acts of violence, including beatings, forced confinement, and honour killings.

Pathways to Reconciliation and Acceptance:

- **Urban Exposure and Education:** Educated families in metropolitan areas are more likely to prioritise individual choice and happiness over caste identity.
- **Workplace Interactions:** Interaction with people from diverse backgrounds in academic and professional settings increases openness to inter-caste unions.
- **Media and Social Influence:** Positive portrayals of inter-caste marriages in cinema, social media, and real-life success stories inspire more acceptance.
- **Gradual Acceptance:** Some families initially oppose but later reconcile with the couple, especially after childbirth or societal pressure for reconciliation.

➤ Community's Role: Custodians of Caste Norms

In the Indian social structure, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, communities play a critical role in maintaining caste hierarchies and regulating social behaviour. When individuals attempt to challenge caste norms—particularly through inter-caste marriage—community institutions often intervene to enforce traditional rules. These institutions include local panchayats, caste councils, khap panchayats, and religious groups, which act as informal but powerful agents of social control.

Communities often resort to punitive measures to discourage inter-caste unions. These include:

- **Social Boycotts:** Families supporting or engaging in inter-caste marriages are ostracised by the village or community. Neighbours may refuse to interact or trade with them.
- **Non-Participation in Ceremonies:** Community members decline to attend weddings, festivals, or even funerals of the families involved.
- **Exclusion from Religious Life:** Families may be barred from entering temples, participating in rituals, or accessing other community resources.⁹

Such actions serve as deterrents for others who may consider similar unions. In many instances, these social norms are

enforced more strongly than the legal provisions meant to protect individuals' rights. For example, in states like Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh, **khap panchayats** have issued extra-legal orders condemning inter-caste or inter-gotra marriages, sometimes even advocating violence.

Despite being unconstitutional, these parallel justice systems operate with considerable influence due to their deep social roots. The fear of community backlash continues to be a major obstacle for couples considering inter-caste marriage, indicating the enduring power of traditional social structures.

➤ Legal Protections vs. Social Realities

India's legal framework has made significant provisions to encourage inter-caste marriages and protect the rights of individuals choosing partners outside their caste. The Special Marriage Act (1954) allows people to marry regardless of caste or religion, offering an alternative to traditional caste-based matrimonial practices. Additionally, under the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan (SCSP), several state governments offer financial incentives to inter-caste couples, especially when one partner belongs to a Scheduled Caste. These schemes aim to promote social integration and challenge caste-based discrimination.¹⁰ Furthermore, supportive legislation such as the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, the Domestic Violence Act, and the Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955) serve to safeguard individuals—particularly women—who face coercion, abuse, or threats for marrying outside their caste. These laws provide a formal mechanism for legal recourse and protection.¹¹

However, the practical implementation of these laws remains inconsistent. In many parts of India, especially rural and semi-urban areas, law enforcement agencies are hesitant to interfere in matters labelled as "family issues" or "private disputes." Police often avoid filing FIRs or delay taking action against community members or families involved in threats or violence related to inter-caste marriages. In some instances, victims report that police side with dominant-caste groups or local panchayats.

This disconnect between constitutional rights and on-ground enforcement creates a gap where social norms often override legal safeguards. As a result, many inter-caste couples are forced to seek NGO assistance or relocate to avoid persecution, reflecting the enduring power of caste even in a legally secular democracy.

➤ Progressive Change and Acceptance

Despite ongoing challenges, India is witnessing gradual but meaningful progress in the acceptance of inter-caste marriages, particularly in urban and educated segments of society. Cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, and Pune have seen a rise in such unions, especially among middle-class youth who are more exposed to liberal values through education and professional environments.

Influential public figures—including Bollywood celebrities, politicians, and academicians—who openly endorse or enter inter-caste marriages have helped normalise these relationships.

Their visibility plays a powerful role in reshaping societal attitudes.

Social media, dating apps, and online matrimonial platforms have also played a transformative role by offering individuals opportunities to connect across caste boundaries, independent of traditional family mediation.

On the policy front, the Government of India and states like Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu have introduced incentive schemes offering monetary support and housing to inter-caste couples, especially when one partner belongs to a Scheduled Caste.

In addition, NGOs, civil society groups, and human rights organisations are actively supporting inter-caste couples by offering legal guidance, shelter, and psychological counselling. These initiatives not only protect couples from backlash but also promote broader social acceptance.

While change is gradual, these developments reflect a shift toward greater inclusivity and social reform.

➤ Challenges that Remain

Despite increasing awareness and legal reforms, inter-caste marriages still constitute only a small fraction (approximately 5–10%) of total marriages in India. Several deep-rooted social challenges continue to hinder broader acceptance:

Geographical and Social Resistance:

- **Rural Dominance:** Caste identities are more rigid in rural areas, where social control mechanisms like panchayats are stronger.
- **Regional Resistance:** States such as **Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar** report the highest levels of opposition, often backed by dominant caste groups.
- **Dominant Castes' Control:** Upper and dominant castes fear a loss of social status and control over traditional privileges if caste boundaries weaken.

Gender-Based Challenges:

- **Harsher Punishment for Women:** Women who marry outside their caste, especially into lower castes, face more severe consequences than men.
- **Honour-Based Violence:** They may be subjected to **violence, abduction, forced confinement**, or even **honour killings**.
- **Family Surveillance:** Daughters are often closely monitored to prevent inter-caste relationships from developing.

Lack of Institutional Support:

- **Weak Legal Enforcement:** Fear of backlash and poor police response discourage couples from seeking legal protection.
- **Social Isolation:** Couples often lose family support and face community-wide ostracisation.

4. CONCLUSION

The institution of marriage in India remains heavily influenced by caste, making inter-caste unions a complex and often contested issue. Families and communities act as both enforcers of caste norms and, in some evolving cases, agents of change.

While progressive, urban, and educated sections of society are showing increased acceptance of inter-caste marriages, a large portion of the population—especially in rural and conservative regions—continues to resist these unions due to fears of social dishonour, loss of caste purity, and community backlash.

To bridge the gap between legal rights and social realities, a multi-pronged strategy is essential. Stronger legal enforcement, police accountability, protection for at-risk couples, and effective implementation of government incentive schemes are necessary steps. Simultaneously, education, awareness campaigns, and grassroots community dialogues must be encouraged to challenge deep-seated prejudices.

The influence of media, the rise of digital platforms, and the role of public figures in promoting social reform can further normalise inter-caste unions. Although the journey toward full societal acceptance is slow and uneven, the increasing visibility and support for inter-caste marriages reflect an evolving India—one that aspires to uphold constitutional ideals of equality, liberty, and individual choice, moving toward a more inclusive and egalitarian social order.

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