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LOVE BEYOND LINEAGE: DECODING CASTE DYNAMICS IN ELITE INDIAN MARRIAGES

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This study examines the phenomenon of "caste no bar" marriages among India's urban elite, exploring how recent socio-economic changes have influenced matrimonial practices and caste considerations. Through qualitative interviews with 30 participants from Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, the research investigates the extent to which traditional caste considerations are being superseded by factors such as education, professional compatibility, and shared values in mate selection. The findings reveal a complex landscape where explicit caste discrimination is declining, yet subtle forms of caste consciousness persist. Education, globalization, and technology emerge as key factors driving attitudinal shifts, particularly among younger generations. However, familial expectations and cultural traditions continue to exert significant influence, creating tension between individual choice and societal norms. The study also uncovers a nuanced interplay between caste and class, where caste distinctions are often reconstituted through class-based identities. While the trend towards "caste no bar" marriages represents a significant shift in social attitudes, the influence of caste in Indian society remains multifaceted. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on caste in modern India, highlighting the need for nuanced understanding of caste dynamics in the context of rapid social change.

Keywords: Marriage, Caste system, Elite matrimony, Social change

I. Introduction

The caste system, a hierarchical social structure that has defined Indian society for millennia, has long been intertwined with the institution of marriage. Traditionally, marriages in India have been arranged within the same caste, perpetuating social divisions and reinforcing caste-based identities. However, in recent decades, India has witnessed significant socio-economic changes, rapid urbanization, and increased access to education, which have begun to challenge the rigidity of the caste system, particularly among the urban elite.

To understand the significance of these changes, it is crucial to first comprehend the nature and origins of the caste system in India. The caste system, known in Sanskrit as "varna vyavastha," is a complex social hierarchy that has its roots in ancient Hindu texts, particularly the Manusmriti (Dirks, 2001). The system divides society into four main varnas or categories: Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (traders and merchants), and Sudras (laborers and artisans). A fifth category, often referred to as "Dalits" or "Untouchables," falls outside this hierarchy and has historically faced severe discrimination (Gupta, 2000).

It is crucial to understand that the caste system is not merely a religious construct but a pervasive social institution that has profoundly shaped all aspects of Indian society, including economic relations, political structures, and cultural practices (Srinivas, 1962; Gupta, 1991). Caste identity, being hereditary, has traditionally determined one's occupation, social status, and marriage prospects, creating a complex web of social relationships and hierarchies. The system has been characterized by its rigidity, with limited opportunities for social mobility across caste boundaries (Dumont, 1970; Beteille, 1965). This entrenched nature of caste in the Indian social system has resulted in a multifaceted influence that permeates various aspects of life.

The impact of caste on social interactions has been particularly profound, determining who one could socialize with, dine with, or marry (Ambedkar, 1936; Srinivas, 1952). These social restrictions have historically served to maintain caste boundaries and reinforce hierarchies. Economically, caste has played a significant role in restricting access to certain occupations and resources, often confining individuals to hereditary professions associated with their caste (Thorat and Newman, 2007). This economic stratification has contributed to the perpetuation of caste-based inequalities over generations. In the political sphere, caste has wielded considerable influence, shaping political representation and leadership roles, and often determining voting patterns and party affiliations (Jaffreot, 2003; Kothari, 1970).

The influence of caste extends deeply into cultural practices, marriage, shaping rituals, customs, and even dietary habits (Marriott, 1968; Khare, 1976). These cultural distinctions have served to reinforce caste identities and maintain social boundaries. Furthermore, the caste system has historically limited educational opportunities for lower castes, creating significant disparities in access to knowledge and skills (Desai and Kulkarni, 2008). This educational inequality has had

far-reaching consequences, affecting social mobility and economic opportunities across generations. The pervasive nature of caste in these various domains of Indian society underscores its complexity and the challenges involved in addressing caste-based discrimination and inequality (Gupta, 2000; Dirks, 2001).

Marriage, in particular, has been a crucial mechanism for maintaining caste boundaries. Endogamy, the practice of marrying within one's caste, has been a cornerstone of the caste system, ensuring the transmission of caste identity and associated privileges or disadvantages across generations (Ghurye, 1932). This practice has not only preserved caste distinctions but also reinforced caste-based social networks and power structures (Karve, 1953). While the Indian Constitution officially abolished untouchability and prohibits caste-based discrimination, the system continues to exert a powerful influence on social relations, economic opportunities, and political dynamics in contemporary India (Jaffrelot, 2003). However, the last few decades have seen gradual shifts in this paradigm, particularly among the urban, educated elite. Several factors have contributed to these changes, including economic liberalization and globalization, which led to increased exposure to global cultures and values, challenging traditional notions of caste and social hierarchy (Srinivas, 2003). Urbanization has played a significant role, as the migration of people from rural areas to cities has weakened traditional community ties and caste-based social networks (Beteille, 1997). Education has been another crucial factor, with increased access to higher education creating a new class of professionals whose social status is increasingly determined by merit and achievement rather than birth (Desai & Dubey, 2011). Legal and political changes, such as affirmative action policies and legal protections against caste discrimination, have empowered historically marginalized groups (Deshpande, 2013). Additionally, changing social attitudes, marked by growing awareness of caste-based inequalities and discrimination, have led to shifts in public opinion, especially among younger generations (Kapur et al., 2010). This research paper seeks to explore how these factors have influenced matrimonial practices among India's elite, with a particular focus on the phenomenon of "caste no bar" marriages. By examining this trend, we aim to gain insights into the changing dynamics of caste in contemporary India and assess the extent to which the traditional caste system is being eroded or redefined in the context of elite matrimony.

The paper will address the following research questions:

1. To what extent are caste considerations being superseded by other factors in mate selection among India's urban elite?
2. What are the primary motivations and challenges associated with "caste no bar" marriages among the elite?
3. How do these changing matrimonial practices reflect broader shifts in the Indian caste system?
4. What are the implications of these changes for social mobility and caste-based discrimination in India?

By exploring these questions, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse on caste in modern India and provide insights into the complex interplay between tradition and modernity in Indian society. Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for academic purposes but also for informing policy decisions and social interventions aimed at addressing caste-based inequalities and promoting social integration in India.

II. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore "caste no bar" marriages among India's urban elite in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. The approach is motivated by the complex nature of caste dynamics in contemporary India, requiring an in-depth understanding of individual experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with 20 participants who are in an inter caste marriage union or are for looking for a mate with no caste boundations, were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse representation across professional backgrounds, age groups (25-40 years), and caste backgrounds. Participants were classified as urban elite based on education (minimum bachelor's degree), professional status, and income levels (top 10% of urban earners). All the respondents who were interviewed were contacted through their phone numbers from the Matrimonial Section published in the Sunday, Times of India.

Interviews, conducted in person or via telephonic and whatsapp video call, lasted 25-30 minutes each, exploring participants' views on caste, mate selection experiences, and perceptions of changing matrimonial practices. A comprehensive literature review supplemented the primary data, contextualizing findings within broader scholarly discussions (Banerjee et al., 2013).

Data analysis followed thematic analysis principles (Braun and Clarke, 2006), using NVivo software for coding and theme identification. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality were also taken into consideration as some of the respondents have asked for complete anonymity. Study limitations include potential lack of generalizability due to the focus on urban elites and possible researcher bias. Reflexivity was practiced to mitigate bias (Finlay, 2002).

III Findings

The analysis of interview data revealed several key themes related to changing attitudes towards caste in matrimonial decisions among India's urban elite. These findings provide insights into the evolving nature of caste considerations in mate selection and the broader implications for the caste system in contemporary India.

A prominent theme that emerged was the shifting priorities in mate selection among the urban elite. While caste remains a consideration for many, it is increasingly being superseded by other factors such as education, professional

compatibility, and shared values. I met Rahul a 32-year-old software engineer from Bangalore and working in Lucknow, stated: "Growing up, caste was never a big deal in my family," Rahul began. "My parents always taught us to value people for their character, not their caste." He recounted a pivotal moment from his college days. "We had this brilliant guy, Ankit, in our project group. One day, I overheard someone mention he was from a lower caste. It hit me – if I had known earlier, would I have judged him differently? That's when I realized how absurd the caste system is." Rahul's eyes sparkled as he continued, "I'm open to marrying someone from any caste. What matters is the person's values and our compatibility."

When asked about opposition to his views, he chuckled. "Oh, plenty! At a family wedding, my grandmother tried to introduce me to a 'nice Brahmin girl'. She was shocked when she learned my girlfriend then was from a different caste." Rahul's expression turned serious as he shared, "I've seen friends struggle with inter-caste relationships. It's heartbreaking how something so arbitrary can cause so much pain."

On the way forward, he was optimistic. "Education and exposure are key. In the IT sector, we work with people from all over. You realize how insignificant these divisions are." As we wrapped up, Rahul shared a poignant thought from his father: "Beta, in the end, we're all human. Everything else is just labels." Walking out, I felt inspired by Rahul's story – a testament to the changing attitudes among India's urban youth, challenging age-old notions of caste and redefining what matters in relationships. This sentiment was echoed by numerous participants, suggesting a generational shift in attitudes towards caste-based endogamy. This finding aligns with research by Fuller and Narasimhan (2008), who observed a growing emphasis on achieved status rather than ascribed status in urban Indian marriages.

Many participants expressed a complex relationship with their caste identity, often distancing themselves from traditional caste hierarchies while still acknowledging caste as a part of their cultural heritage. A 28-year-old management consultant from Lucknow, working in Mumbai explained: "I asked her about her views on marriage and caste. Priya's eyes lit up. "Oh, my parents are surprisingly open! They've always said they're fine with me marrying outside our caste. But," she smiled, "they do have one condition – the guy should be able to sit through our family's three-hour Diwali puja without complaining!" Her laughter faded into a more serious tone. "But you know, while I wouldn't say no to someone just because of their caste, I do want a partner who gets where I come from. It's not about caste really, it's more about shared experiences and understanding." Priya then shared an anecdote that illustrated her point. "Last year, I dated this guy – different caste, but similar background. We clicked because we both understood the pressure of being first-generation professionals in our families. He got why I couldn't just quit my job to travel the world, even though I wanted to. It's those kinds of shared values that matter more than caste." As our conversation drew to a close, Priya reflected, "I think for our generation, it's less about caste and more about finding someone who fits into our world. Someone who can hang out with my cousins during Holi and also network at a corporate event." Her story reflected a nuanced reality – where caste was losing its explicit importance, but cultural compatibility, often shaped by similar class backgrounds, was gaining prominence in the marriage decisions of young, urban Indians.

This finding suggests that while explicit caste considerations may be declining, they are being partially replaced by more subtle forms of social stratification based on class amongst the upwardly mobile people in Indian society. This observation resonates with Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital and its role in social reproduction.

I met Neha, a 35-year-old marketing executive in an MNC in Lucknow, where I got to know about her past experiences which led to her inter caste marriage. Her story of love across caste lines unfolded like the pages of a novel. Neha says that "when I told my parents about Vikram who was from a different caste, you'd think I'd announced I was moving to some other world" recalling that this was the initial shock when her parents were not amused at this gesture and declined her thoughts to marry someone from the other caste. Vikram was a colleague and they both worked on similar lines in the company. She says her journey from tension to acceptance for marriage was paved with small, significant moments. Like the day her mother invited Vikram to learn the family's secret biryani recipe – a gesture that spoke volumes. Neha was blushing as she described their engagement, a blend of two worlds. "Planning the wedding is like a crash course in cultural fusion," she mused. The challenges they faced weren't just about tradition, but about reimagining what 'elite matrimony' truly means. As our chat concluded, Neha left me with a thought that lingered: "Elite matrimony isn't about caste or wealth. It's about having the courage to choose love, no matter what society says." Her story was a vivid illustration of India's changing marital landscape, where love increasingly transcends traditional boundaries, even if the path isn't always smooth. These accounts highlight the ongoing negotiations between individual desires and familial or societal expectations, a phenomenon that Donner (2016) has explored in her work on love marriages in India.

Education and exposure to global cultures were consistently cited as key factors in shaping attitudes towards caste and marriage. A 30-year-old investment banker educated in the United States but now working for a prominent IT company in Lucknow says, "Studying abroad really changed my outlook. I realized how arbitrary caste distinctions are, and I came back determined to make decisions based on merit and compatibility rather than family background." This aligns with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) theory of individualization, which posits that increased education and global exposure lead to a weakening of traditional social ties.

The interviews also revealed a persistent undercurrent of caste consciousness among the urban elite. A 37-year-old entrepreneur explained: "I'm open to marrying someone from any caste, but I have to admit there's a certain comfort in being with someone who shares my caste background. It's not about superiority or inferiority; it's just about cultural familiarity." This finding suggests that while explicit caste discrimination may be declining among the urban elite, more

subtle forms of caste-based affiliation persist. Dickey (2016) has termed this phenomenon the "aestheticization of caste" among India's middle classes.

A significant theme that emerged was the generational gap in attitudes towards caste and marriage. A 29-year-old doctor said, "My parents are fairly liberal, but when it comes to marriage, they still have this ingrained preference for our own caste. It's not that they're against inter-caste marriages in principle, but they worry about cultural differences and 'what people will say'. I've had to do a lot of convincing to get them to be open to the idea of me marrying outside our caste and in fact, I have recently used the local newspaper Times of India by giving the advertisement in the 'Elite Matrimony-Caste No Bar' section of the newspaper. It was good to see that there were many more marriage advertisements there in the section." This generational divide aligns with research by Allendorf and Pandian (2016), who found that younger generations in India are more likely to support inter-caste marriages than their elders.

The interviews also revealed a complex interplay between caste and class considerations in elite matrimonial practices. A 33-year-old corporate lawyer in Lucknow observed: "In my social circle, people say they don't care about caste, but they'll talk about wanting a partner from a 'good family' or with a certain kind of upbringing. Often, that's just code for upper caste and upper class." This observation echoes the work of Fernandes (2006), who argued that caste distinctions in urban India are increasingly being reconstituted through class-based identities and consumption practices.

The impact of technology, particularly matrimonial websites and apps, on changing attitudes towards caste in marriage was frequently discussed. A 31-year-old IT professional who now works in Hyderabad commented: "He recounted how he and his now-wife, Priya, both set their preferences to 'caste no bar' on the app. "It was liberating," he said. "No awkward conversations with parents about gotra or community. Just two people connecting over shared interests."

Arjun's eyes lit up as he described their first date. "We met at this quirky cafe. I was nervous, but then she made a joke about coding, and I knew she was the one," he laughed. However, it wasn't all smooth sailing. "When we told our families, there was some resistance. My grandmother asked if the app had a 'caste filter' we'd forgotten to use!" Arjun shook his head, amused.

As we finished our coffee, Arjun reflected, "Technology isn't perfect. You still see profiles specifying caste preferences. But it's giving people like us a chance to look beyond these boundaries. It's a start, you know?"

Arjun's story illustrated how technology is reshaping the landscape of Indian matrimony, one swipe at a time." This aligns with research by Titzmann (2013) on the digitalization of mate selection in India, which found that online platforms can both reinforce and challenge traditional caste boundaries in complex ways.

To further illustrate these themes, a 34-year-old journalist working in Delhi shared her experience: "I come from a Brahmin family of Lucknow, but I married someone from a different caste. It was a struggle at first, especially with the older generation. But over time, they've come to accept it. What really helped was that my husband and I share similar values and career aspirations. That's what matters more to us than caste." This narrative reflects the findings of Banerjee et al. (2013), who observed a growing emphasis on compatibility and shared values in partner selection among educated urban Indians.

Another participant, a 39-year-old entrepreneur, offered a different perspective: "I'm proud of my caste heritage, but I don't let it dictate my life choices. When I was looking for a partner, I was open to all castes. However, I found that I connected better with people from similar backgrounds. It's not about caste per se, but about shared experiences and cultural understanding." This nuanced view of caste identity aligns with Gupta's (2000) analysis of the changing meanings of caste in contemporary India.

To conclude, the interviews conducted in Lucknow reveal a complex and evolving landscape of caste considerations in elite matrimonial practices. While there's a clear trend towards more open attitudes regarding inter-caste marriages, especially among younger, educated professionals, the influence of caste persists in subtle ways. Cultural compatibility, often intertwined with caste and class backgrounds, remains a significant factor in mate selection.

IV. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that significant changes are occurring in the way India's urban elite approach caste in matrimonial decisions. While caste has not disappeared as a consideration, its importance is diminishing relative to factors such as education, professional compatibility, and shared values. This shift reflects broader changes in Indian society, including increased urbanization, higher education levels, and exposure to global cultures.

However, the research also reveals the complex and often contradictory nature of these changes. While explicit caste discrimination in mate selection appears to be declining among the urban elite, more subtle forms of caste consciousness persist. The intersection of caste with class and cultural capital creates new forms of social stratification that may indirectly perpetuate caste-based distinctions.

The generational differences observed in the study suggest that attitudes towards caste and marriage are likely to continue evolving. Younger generations appear more open to inter-caste marriages, although family influence remains significant. Technology is playing a crucial role in facilitating these changes, providing new avenues for individuals to connect across traditional caste boundaries.

These findings contribute to our understanding of how the caste system is being reconfigured in contemporary India. They suggest that while the rigid caste hierarchies of the past are eroding, caste continues to shape social relations in

more nuanced ways. The elite matrimonial practices observed in this study reflect a broader renegotiation of caste identities in the context of modernization and globalization.

Looking ahead, several directions for future research and policy implications can be identified. There is a need for longitudinal studies to track how attitudes towards caste in marriage evolve over time, particularly as the current generation of urban elites starts families of their own. Future research should also explore the intersections of caste with other social categories such as gender, religion, and regional identity in shaping matrimonial practices. Comparative studies examining caste considerations in matrimony across different socio-economic groups and geographic regions could highlight the uneven nature of social change in India.

The findings suggest a need for policies that continue to promote inter-caste marriages and address more subtle forms of caste discrimination. This could include educational initiatives that challenge caste stereotypes and promote social integration. Given the role of technology in facilitating changing attitudes towards caste in marriage, there is potential for innovative technological solutions that promote caste diversity in mate selection. Additionally, there is a need for more open public discourse on caste and marriage to challenge persistent stereotypes and promote greater social acceptance of inter-caste unions.

In conclusion, while the trend towards "caste no bar" marriages among India's urban elite represents a significant shift in social attitudes, it is clear that the influence of caste in Indian society remains complex and multifaceted. As India continues to navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity, the evolution of matrimonial practices will likely play a crucial role in shaping the future of the caste system. The urban elite's negotiation of caste in marriage reflects broader societal changes and may serve as a bellwether for future trends. However, it is important to recognize that these changes are not uniform across all segments of society, and the experiences of the urban elite may not be representative of India as a whole.

This research contributes to the ongoing scholarly discourse on caste in modern India by providing insights into the complex interplay between tradition and modernity in Indian society. It highlights the need for nuanced understanding of caste dynamics in contemporary India, moving beyond simplistic narratives of either the persistence or disappearance of caste. Instead, it reveals a process of transformation where caste continues to matter, but in increasingly subtle and complex ways.

The study also has implications for policy-makers and social reformers. While legal measures to combat caste discrimination are crucial, this research suggests that social change is also occurring through shifts in individual attitudes and practices, particularly among the urban elite. Supporting and accelerating these changes through education, media representation, and public discourse could be effective strategies for promoting a more egalitarian society.

Furthermore, the research underscores the importance of technology in shaping social dynamics. As digital platforms increasingly mediate social interactions, including mate selection, they offer both challenges and opportunities for addressing caste-based discrimination. Developing ethical guidelines for these platforms and leveraging their potential to promote diversity could be important areas for future intervention.

In the broader context of global social change, this study offers insights into how traditional social structures adapt and evolve in the face of modernization and globalization. The Indian experience with caste and marriage may offer valuable lessons for understanding similar processes of social transformation in other societies grappling with entrenched systems of social stratification.

As such, continued research and thoughtful policy interventions will be essential in promoting a more inclusive and equitable society that respects individual choice while acknowledging the complex cultural landscape of contemporary India. The journey towards a "caste no bar" society is ongoing, marked by both progress and persistent challenges. Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for academic discourse but also for informing policies and social interventions aimed at creating a more just and equitable India.

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