

# **Inter-Caste Marriages in India: Has it really changed over time?**

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## **Introduction**

The concept of caste system and religious discrimination are like a bane on the path of India's progress. For centuries Indian society has been divided on the basis of caste system and religion (Malhotra et al, 1977). The problem of caste system was so deep rooted that it took years for the Indians to come out of that idea. Even today also India is struggling to come out of this social menace. History reveals that efforts have been made by various social reformers and individuals whose name doesn't appear in the pages of history to make India free from the clutches of caste system, untouchability and race discrimination. And when we talk about Indian marriages, which are inter-caste and inter- religious, it seems like a taboo to most of the people. But in order to eradicate the caste system and race discrimination, it is important that there should be inter-caste and inter - religious marriages. Marriages are regarded as the most important social custom and the best means to remove the barrier of caste system. Today in Indian society though we can see inter-caste marriages but mostly it is part of the city culture and they constitute a minor proportion of the total marriages. The rural parts of the country is by and large dominated by the same caste marriage and still have a long way to go.

Kannan (1963) studied 149 inter-caste marriages in the city of Bombay. He found that inter-caste marriage is steadily increasing only recently and that has assumed a significant component since 1956. The age of the women at the time of her marriage, the freedom given to her to choose her partner, the range of female education are some of the important factors influencing the inter-caste marriages in Bombay (Kannan, 1963). A study based on matrimonial advertisement data shows that, in a section of the families, the caste barrier is being changed and people come forward for inter-caste marriages. The friends and relatives in most cases play all foul means to stop such unions; but this tendency to oppose inter-caste marriages registered in West Bengal, have increased from 700 in 1955 to 5800 in 1969. Brahmins which are at the top of the caste hierarchy are most opposed to inter-cast marriages. Kayasthas, Baidyas and other Hindus are

increasingly becoming more liberal towards inter-caste marriage. Also post graduates are most liberal for inter-caste marriage as compared to under graduates and graduates (Sarkar, 1970).

A study conducted in rural areas of Andhra Pradesh found that as many as 936 people in the sample favored marriage of their sons and daughters only within their caste, while only 29 people were not very particular about marriage within the caste. This rigid or conservatism with regard to inter-caste matrimonial alliance was not confined to the few influential castes groups alone. It was uniformly prevalent among all caste and among the different level of society. On the whole it can be seen that castes both at the top and at the bottom as well as those who are trying to improve their social status are keen on confining their marital relations only to their own caste, excepting for few people who are insignificant in their numbers (Chintamani, 1973).

Another study on inter-caste marriage (Reddy et.al, 1984) shows that the scheduled caste has exhibited the highest tendency for inter-caste marriages than the other castes. The urban residence, education, employment in modern occupation and middle class economic background have tended to be a set of attributes affecting the incidence of inter-caste marriages. He further observes that inter-caste marriage takes place at fairly advanced age rather than at the young age (Reddy et.al, 1984).

Kapadia (1966) in a study of inter-caste marriages in India interviewed 513 university graduates. It was found that 51 percent parents expressed their willingness to cheer children marrying outside their own caste. Only one-third were against this departure from custom. Post graduate students were only moderately in favor of inter-caste marriage (Saroja, 1999). Urbanization and industrialization have certain effect in braking down the barriers of caste (Prasad, 1957; Banerjee et.al, 1978). An article of times of India (1 Feb 2010) shows that in India 4750 marriages are inter-caste involving Dalits in 2008-09 while the number was slightly lower at 4205 in 2007-08 and 3945 in 2006-07. Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra lead in this direction registering around 1000 inter-caste marriages for three years.

For years Indians had an orthodox mindset. They couldn't imagine marriages beyond the same caste. community and religion. They had a conception that marriages are only possible in the

same community and caste. Those who dared for the inter-caste marriage by violating the social norm had to face the consequences in terms of violence, social boycott, family boycott and death of the boys and girls(honour killing). Even in this twenty first century, honour killing is still practiced in most parts of northern India when there are cases of inter-caste marriages against the wishes of the family members. Caste is such a rigid and water tight compartment in Indian society that it is almost next to impossible to think of a marriage between a higher caste and a lower caste. It is expected that with modernization, development and increase in educational level etc., the impact of various divisive social forces like caste, religion, various taboos etc. would become weaker. The society is expected to become more broad minded, forward looking and tolerant. India has already embarked on the path of modernization, development, and globalization etc. Against this background, therefore, from the researcher's point of view, it will be quite interesting to analyze the pattern and spatial distribution and the changes in inter-caste marriage patterns in India. The available literature on the subject is also scanty. Hence, there is a need to study the changes in the pattern of inter-caste marriages in India. The recently conducted national level survey in India (NFHS-3) gives the information on marriages of couples and their castes with all other background information. This study is an humble attempt in that direction.

## **Objectives**

The main objectives of the study are,

1. To analyse the extent, pattern and spatial distribution of inter-caste marriages in India at the national, regional and state level.
2. To understand the determinants of inter-caste marriages in India.

## **Data and Methods**

The data from the recently concluded National Family Health Survey (NFHS-III, 2005-2006) has been used for the present study. The NFHS-3 was a nationally representative sample survey of 99260 ever-married women ages 15-49. It was conducted in all the 29 states of India. Information about caste of the husband and wife were also collected during the survey. This study analyzes caste information of 32160 Hindu couples. Caste system is mostly prevalent among Hindus though this information was also collected from other religious groups. The

couples belonging to other religious groups have been removed from the analysis though their caste information is also available. The information collected on caste is grouped into three four categories namely Scheduled Caste (SC), Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Others (which includes all the higher castes). The ascending order of class hierarchy in India is SC, OBC and Others but schedule tribe (ST) is not included in this hierarchy. ST is excluded from this study as it reflects more of a community rather than a caste. If a woman belonging to higher caste marries to a man belonging to lower caste and a woman belonging to a lower caste marries to a man of higher caste, then it is considered as inter-caste marriage. In other words if a women marries to a man other than her own caste is considered as an inter-caste marriage.

Both bivariate and multivariate analysis has been used for the analysis. In order to examine effect of socio-economic factors on inter-caste marriages, logistic regression analysis was carried out in which dependent variable is inter-caste marriage and independent variables are marital duration, residence, education, working status of woman, household structure, wealth quintile and mass media exposure .

## **Results and Discussion**

Table 1 shows that in India the percentage of inter-caste marriages is about 10 percent out of which in 4.97 percent cases women marry to men of lower caste and in another 4.95 percent cases, the women belong to lower caste but husbands belong to higher castes. Generally it is expected that with more development and education, the force of caste factor becomes weak and thereby increases the incidence of inter-caste marriages. The southern region of India is socio-economically more developed than other regions of India. So, applying the same logic inter-caste marriage is expected to be more in the southern region than other parts of India. But our analysis shows that inter-caste marriage is only 9.71 percent in southern part of India. It is found that inter-caste marriage is highest in western region (17 per cent). Some states are showing more than 20 percent inter-caste marriages. For instance inter-caste marriage in Punjab is 22.36 percent, in Meghalaya it is 25.00 percent, in Goa it is 26.67 percent and in Kerala it is 21.35 percent. The states showing very low percentages of inter-caste marriages are Jammu and Kashmir (1.67 per cent), Rajasthan (2.36 per cent), Chhattisgarh (3.38 per cent), Madhya

Pradesh (3.57 per cent), Bihar (4.60 per cent) and Tamil Nadu (2.59 per cent). The states having moderate to high inter-caste marriages are Haryana (17.16 per cent), Manipur (18.33 per cent), Tripura (17.81 per cent), Maharashtra (17.79 per cent) and Karnataka (16.47 per cent).

Table 2 shows the percentage distribution of inter-caste marriages in India by background variables. It is found that with the increase in marital duration, there is an overall decline in reported inter-caste marriages in India. This may be due to the fact that young women who got married recently might have experienced more inter-caste marriages due to the impact of female autonomy, modernization and development. Husbands who marry more than once experience more inter-caste marriages (11.36 per cent) as compared to men who marry only once (9.82 per cent). It may be due to the fact those who marry more than one time may find it difficult to find a partner within the same caste as the option may be limited. Place of residence also has an effect on inter-caste marriage. It is high in urban areas than the rural areas as urban population is expected to be more modern and forward looking. Normally it is perceived that education has a positive effect on inter-caste marriages. But in our study it is found that women with higher education are more interested in same caste marriage. This is also true for the husband's education. It appears that education does not influence much the incidence of inter-caste marriages in India. Women having inter-caste marriage are more working than non-working women. Economic condition has an effect on inter-caste marriage. With the increase in wealth, inter-caste marriage also increases. For example inter-caste marriage is 8.61 per cent in the poorest quintile as compared to 10.52 per cent in the richest quintile. Usually exposure to mass media has a positive effect on the incidence of inter-caste marriage. It is quite interesting to find that women having full mass media exposure are experiencing less inter-caste marriage than those having partial or no mass media exposure.

To find out the controlled effect of socio-economic and region variables on inter-caste marriage, logistic regression analysis is carried out in which inter-caste marriage is taken as the dependent variable. In case of India, inter-caste marriage is high among the couples who marry recently as compared to those who marry before 20 years. This implies that the phenomenon of inter-caste marriage is a recent one. Likelihood of having inter-caste marriage is almost 24 per cent higher among couples who marry more than one time. In urban areas 10 per cent more women are more

likely to have inter-caste marriages than in rural areas. Education of both wife and husband have negative effect on inter-caste marriages. Husbands with higher education are 16 percent less likely to have inter-caste marriage than illiterate husband and women with higher education are 10 percent less likely to have inter-caste marriage than women with no or low education. Mass media exposure and wealth do not show any significant effect on inter-caste marriage. After controlling all other socio economic variables, it is found that states also has significant effect on inter-caste marriage and there is a spatial variation in the incidence of inter-caste marriage. As compared to Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal likelihood of having inter-caste marriage is more than two times in Punjab and Haryana, Assam, Maharashtra and Karnataka which are socio-economically more prosperous. Whereas in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu which constitute the bulk of the socio-economically backward states, inter-caste marriage is low as compared to Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal. However, percentage of inter-caste marriage is high in Orissa and Gujarat by almost 70 percent.

## **Conclusion**

India is still by and large a traditional society with rigid caste system. Caste plays a very important role in the selection of mates in marriages. To most Indians, it is difficult to think of marriage beyond the own caste. But it is quite heartening to notice that the force of the caste in marriage selection is gradually loosening over time as about ten percent of the marriages in India are reported to be inter-caste marriages. This is a good beginning to completely eradicate the caste system in India. This change in the marriage pattern in India is a very recent phenomenon due to the impact of modernization, socio-economic development and globalization of Indian economy. Various socio-economic and demographic factors also affect the pattern of inter-caste marriages in India. There is a significant spatial variation in the pattern of inter-caste marriages. There seems to be higher inter-caste marriages in socio-economically developed states like Punjab, Haryana, Assam, Maharashtra and Karnataka in comparison with the backward states like northern India namely Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan. It is expected that the incidence of such inter-caste marriages will increase with degree of modernization and socio-economic development. There is need to glorify, give media exposure and encourage such marriages in order to reduce the caste barrier prevalent in Indian society. India will require long

time yet to come when the marriage system in India will be completely free of caste discrimination

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**Table 1: Percentage distribution of women marrying man of different castes in India and States**

State	Women Marry Man			Total Inter-caste marriages	Total sample
	of same caste	of lower caste than her caste	of upper caste than her caste		
<b>India</b>	<b>90.08</b>	<b>4.97</b>	<b>4.95</b>	<b>9.92</b>	<b>32154</b>
<b>North</b>	<b>91.06</b>	<b>5.15</b>	<b>3.79</b>	<b>8.94</b>	<b>2350</b>
Delhi	88.21	5.68	6.11	11.79	229
Haryana	82.84	10.98	6.18	17.16	437
Himachal Pradesh	89.68	5.56	4.76	10.32	126
Jammu and Kashmir	98.33	1.67	0.00	1.67	60
Punjab	77.64	11.79	10.57	22.36	246
Rajasthan	97.64	1.45	0.91	2.36	1101
Uttaranchal	91.89	4.05	4.05	8.11	148
<b>Central</b>	<b>92.28</b>	<b>4.39</b>	<b>3.33</b>	<b>7.72</b>	<b>9116</b>
Chhattisgarh	96.62	0.78	2.60	3.38	385
Madhya Pradesh	96.43	1.87	1.71	3.57	1231
Uttar Pradesh	91.36	5.00	3.64	8.64	7502
<b>East</b>	<b>91.17</b>	<b>4.81</b>	<b>4.02</b>	<b>8.83</b>	<b>3952</b>
Bihar	95.40	2.04	2.55	4.60	1370
Jharkhand	87.67	5.75	6.58	12.33	365
Orissa	86.02	7.49	6.48	13.98	694
West Bengal	90.54	5.84	3.61	9.46	1523
<b>North East</b>	<b>82.74</b>	<b>10.11</b>	<b>7.16</b>	<b>17.26</b>	<b>475</b>
Arunachal Pradesh	85.71	14.29	0.00	14.29	7
Assam	83.49	9.35	7.17	16.51	321
Manipur	81.67	13.33	5.00	18.33	60
Meghalaya	75.00	0.00	25.00	25.00	4
Mizoram	*	*	*	*	*
Nagaland	85.71	0.00	14.29	14.29	7
Sikkim	85.71	14.29	0.00	14.29	7
Tripura	82.19	10.96	6.85	17.81	73
<b>West</b>	<b>83.03</b>	<b>6.31</b>	<b>10.66</b>	<b>16.97</b>	<b>5308</b>
Goa	73.33	13.33	13.33	26.67	15
Gujarat	86.12	6.27	7.61	13.88	1117
Maharashtra	82.21	6.30	11.49	17.79	4177
<b>South</b>	<b>91.38</b>	<b>4.60</b>	<b>4.02</b>	<b>8.62</b>	<b>10953</b>
Andhra Pradesh	92.37	3.26	4.37	7.63	4508
Karnataka	83.53	9.78	6.68	16.47	2648
Kerala	78.65	14.61	6.74	21.35	356
Tamil Nadu	97.41	1.34	1.25	2.59	3441



**Table2: Percentage distribution of women marrying men of different castes by background variables in India**

Background Characteristics	Women Marry Man			Total Inter-caste marriages	Total sample
	of same caste	of lower caste than her caste	of upper caste than her caste		
<b>Marital Duration</b>					
< 10 years	89.74	5.40	4.86	10.26	11599
10-20	89.52	5.17	5.31	10.48	11699
20+	91.27	4.14	4.59	8.73	8862
<b>Marriage Type</b>					
Only once	90.18	4.96	4.86	9.82	30435
More than once	88.64	5.03	6.33	11.36	1690
<b>Place of Residence</b>					
Urban	89.31	5.64	5.05	10.69	10741
Rural	90.46	4.64	4.90	9.54	21420
<b>Education of Women</b>					
No education	90.94	4.77	4.29	9.06	14044
Primary	89.35	4.21	6.45	10.65	5089
Secondary	89.13	5.61	5.26	10.87	10911
Higher	91.07	4.82	4.11	8.93	2116
<b>Partner's Education</b>					
No education	90.41	4.81	4.78	9.59	6629
Primary	89.64	4.93	5.44	10.36	6329
Secondary	89.66	5.19	5.15	10.34	15163
Higher	91.82	4.46	3.72	8.18	4032
<b>Caste</b>					
Scheduled caste	91.92	0.00	8.08	8.08	7303
Other backward class [OBC]	91.15	2.64	6.21	8.85	16136
None of them	86.55	13.45	0.00	13.45	8722
<b>Household structure</b>					
Nuclear	90.27	4.87	4.86	9.73	17045
Non nuclear	89.82	5.09	5.10	10.18	14807
<b>Respondent currently working</b>					
No	90.23	5.14	4.63	9.77	19215
Yes	89.90	4.68	5.42	10.10	12901
<b>Wealth Index</b>					
Poorest	91.39	4.34	4.27	8.61	4680
Poorer	90.35	4.43	5.22	9.65	6364
Middle	90.39	5.10	4.50	9.61	7152
Richer	89.23	5.34	5.43	10.77	7004
Richest	89.48	5.37	5.14	10.52	6960
<b>Mass Media Exposure</b>					
No Exposure	90.57	4.66	4.77	9.43	10815
Partial Exposure	89.67	5.18	5.15	10.33	18452
Full Exposure	90.91	4.80	4.29	9.09	2893
<b>Total</b>	<b>90.08</b>	<b>4.97</b>	<b>4.95</b>	<b>9.92</b>	<b>32160</b>

**Table3: Logistic regression analysis of inter-caste marriages in India**

<b>Explanatory Variables</b>	<b>Exp(B)</b>
<b>Marital Duration</b>	
20+ ®	
< 10 years	1.22***
10-20	1.19***
<b>Marriage Type</b>	
Only once®	
More than once	1.24***
<b>Place of Residence</b>	
Rural®	
Urban	1.10**
<b>Education of Women</b>	
Up to Primary®	
Primary and above	0.90**
<b>Partner's Education</b>	
Up to Primary®	
Primary and above	0.84***
<b>Wealth Index</b>	
Poor®	
Middle	1.03
Rich	1.04
<b>Mass Media Exposure</b>	
No Exposure®	
Exposure	0.98
<b>States</b>	
Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal®	
Punjab and Haryana	2.48***
Rajasthan	0.25***
Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh	0.37***
Bihar	0.50***
Orissa	1.71***
West Bengal	1.09
Assam	2.15***
Gujarat	1.70***
Maharashtra	2.33***
Andhra Pradesh	0.83**
Kerala	3.03***
Karnataka	2.05***
Tamil Nadu	0.27***
Others	1.48***

Note: Dependent Variable: 0-no inter-caste marriage, 1- inter-caste marriage

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$

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