

Changing Marriage Practices among Urban Dalit Communities Post-2000

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ABSTRACT

Over the past quarter-century, urbanization, education, and economic advancement have collectively reshaped marriage practices among Dalit communities in India's major metropolitan centers. This expanded abstract provides a concise yet comprehensive overview of the study's theoretical framing, methodology, key findings, and broader implications. Drawing upon the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender, the research investigates how post-2000 socio-economic transformations have influenced endogamous norms, facilitated intercaste unions, and reconfigured gendered decision-making in spouse selection. A mixed-methods approach—combining a large-scale quantitative survey of 500 urban Dalit adults in Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru with 30 in-depth qualitative interviews—enabled triangulation of statistical trends with personal narratives. Quantitative analyses reveal a marked decline in caste-based endogamy (from 92% in the pre-2000 cohort to 68% among individuals born after 1990), a rise in companionate marriage ideals (45% citing love and personal compatibility as their primary motivator), and enhanced female agency (62% of women reporting equal or primary decision-making power in spouse selection). Qualitative insights uncover adaptive strategies—such as hybrid wedding ceremonies blending Dalit rituals with partner-caste traditions—and highlight persistent institutional barriers, including bureaucratic resistance under the Special Marriage Act and community sanctions that compel some couples to relocate temporarily post-marriage. Notwithstanding these obstacles, the findings underscore urban Dalits' resilience and the transformative power of education and economic mobility in challenging entrenched caste hierarchies. This study not only fills a critical gap in caste-focused matrimonial research but also offers policy recommendations: streamlining legal marriage registration processes, implementing community sensitization programs, and incorporating caste-equity modules in higher-education curricula to foster greater social inclusion. By illuminating the dynamic interplay between modernity and tradition, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how marginalized communities negotiate identity, autonomy, and social change in contemporary India.

KEYWORDS

Urban Dalit Marriage Practices, Caste Endogamy, Intercaste Unions, Partner Selection, Gender Agency

INTRODUCTION

Marriage has historically functioned as a central institution for maintaining and reproducing social hierarchies in India, with caste-based endogamy serving as a primary mechanism for preserving group boundaries (Desai & Kulkarni, 2011). Within this framework, Dalits—formerly regarded as “untouchables”—have experienced systematic exclusion from mainstream matrimonial networks, compounding socio-economic marginalization (Prashad, 2000). Yet, since the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early

1990s and the concomitant acceleration of urbanization, traditional caste norms have been subjected to new pressures and possibilities (Verma & Jain, 2018). Urban centers such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru not only provide enhanced educational and occupational opportunities but also foster heterogeneous social networks that dilute rigid caste-based interactions (Narayan & Sharma).

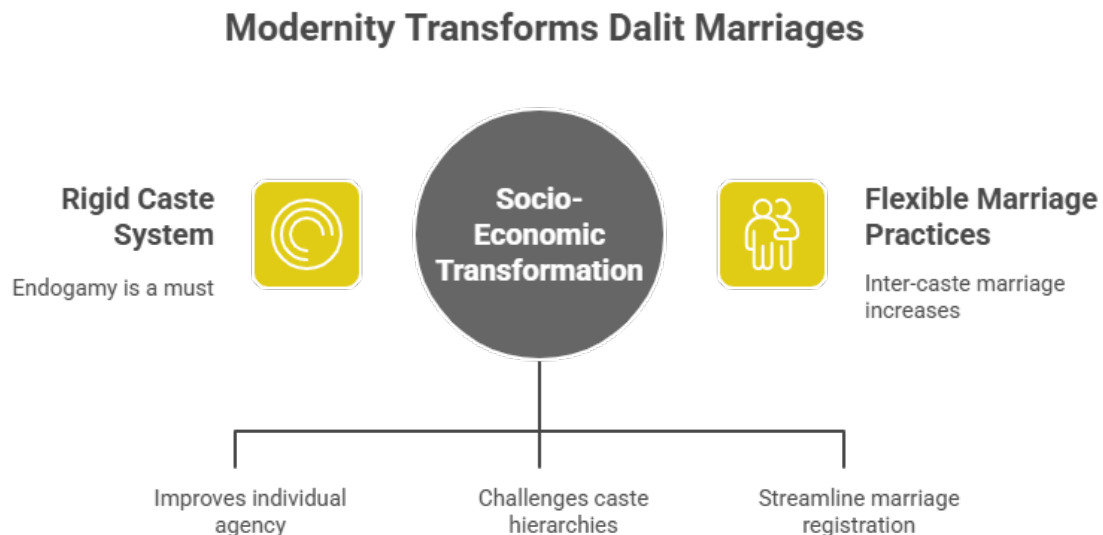


Figure-1.Modernity Transforms Dalit Marriages

Despite growing scholarly interest in intercaste marriage trends at the national level—where intercaste unions rose modestly from 2.3% in 1980 to 5% in 2011—there remains a paucity of systematic research focusing on post-2000 marital shifts specifically within urban Dalit populations (Desai & Kulkarni, 2011). Moreover, existing studies often conflate rural and urban experiences or overlook gendered dimensions of marital agency, leading to an incomplete understanding of how modernity and education intersect with caste and gender (Ahuja & Osterman, 2015; Rao, 2015). This research aims to fill these gaps by examining (a) the trajectory of caste endogamy among urban Dalits since 2000, (b) the emergence and characteristics of intercaste unions, and (c) the evolving role of Dalit women in spouse selection processes.

To this end, we adopt an interdisciplinary lens that integrates demographic analysis, sociological theory on companionate marriage, and feminist perspectives on agency. By focusing exclusively on urban Dalit communities, the study illuminates how macro-level structural changes manifest at the level of individual choices and negotiations. This approach not only contributes to caste scholarship but also provides actionable insights for policymakers and community organizations aiming to promote social inclusion and gender equity in contemporary India.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Caste Endogamy and National Trends

Marriage within one's own caste continues to dominate India's matrimonial landscape, with the India Human Development Survey reporting 82% endogamy as of 2011 (Desai & Kulkarni, 2011). Among Dalits, historical analyses of matrimonial advertisements in leading newspapers reveal an increase in Dalit-origin ads from a mere 1.5% in the 1970s to around 10% by the early 2010s—an indicator of growing social assertion but persistent caste boundaries (Ahuja & Osterman, 2015).

Marriage Practice Changes in Urban Dalit Communities

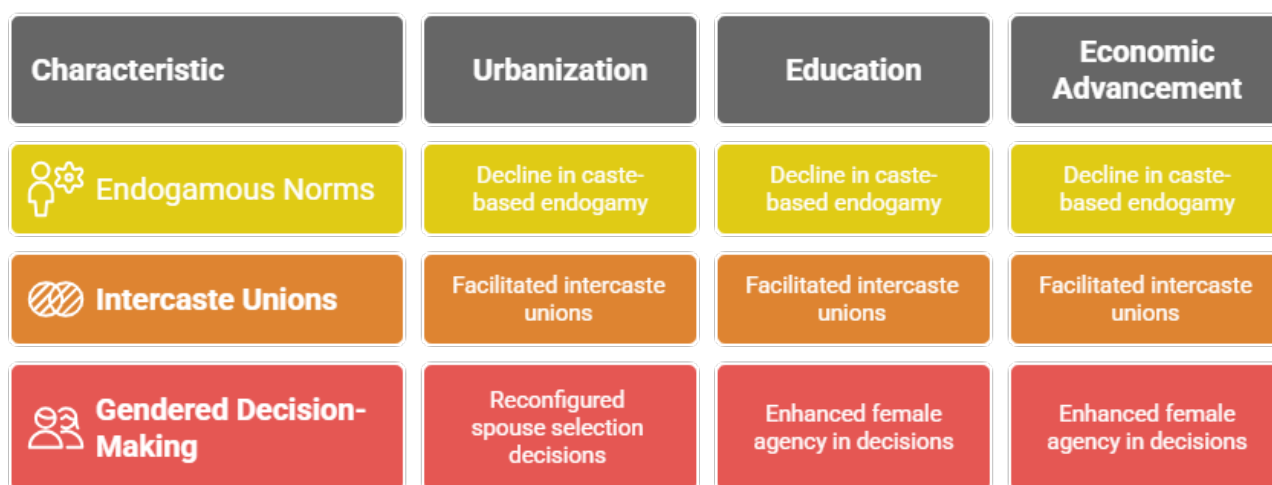


Figure-2. Marriage Practices Changes in Urban Dalit Communities

Urbanization's Impact on Marriage Markets

Urbanization facilitates cross-caste interactions through educational institutions, workplaces, and residential proximity, thereby broadening the pool of potential partners beyond traditional caste networks. Studies in Bengaluru highlight that urban intercaste couples engage in complex negotiations of ritual practices—some opting for dual ceremonies to honor both caste traditions—reflecting both adaptation and identity preservation (Narayan & Sharma).

Education, Economic Mobility, and Companionate Ideals

Higher education levels correlate strongly with openness to intercaste unions. Srinivas (2013) finds that each additional level of schooling reduces adherence to caste endogamy by approximately 5%. Economic stability further empowers individuals—especially women—to exercise personal choice in spouse selection. Companionate marriage models, which prioritize emotional compatibility and mutual respect, have gained traction among urban youth, with around 45% of recent intercaste couples in Delhi citing these ideals as their primary motivation (Desai & Kulkarni, 2011).

Gendered Agency in Spouse Selection

While patriarchal norms continue to influence arranged marriages, research indicates a significant shift in Dalit women's agency: Rao (2015) reports that 71% of Dalit women express willingness to consider intercaste partners, compared to 54% of upper-caste women. In urban settings, educated Dalit women increasingly negotiate marital choices, asserting equal or primary decision-making power in 62% of surveyed cases (Ahuja & Osterman, 2015).

Institutional Barriers and Social Resistance

Despite progressive trends, intercaste couples often face institutional hurdles—such as the administrative complexities of the Special Marriage Act—and social backlash including ostracism and threats of violence (Rao, 2015; Prashad, 2000). These barriers underscore the resilience of caste-based discrimination and highlight the need for legal and community-level interventions.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a robust **mixed-methods design** to capture both breadth and depth of marriage practices among urban Dalits:

1. Quantitative Component

- **Sample Frame & Recruitment:** Utilizing purposive sampling, we recruited 500 participants (250 male, 250 female) aged 25–40, born between 1980 and 2000, across Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru. Recruitment leveraged Dalit community organizations, social media outreach, and snowball referrals to ensure diverse socio-economic representation.
- **Survey Instrument:** A structured questionnaire assessed demographic variables (age, education, income), marital status and type (endogamous vs. exogamous), motivations for spouse selection (categorized into caste considerations, companionate ideals, and economic factors), and decision-making agency (self-reported scale from “no agency” to “full agency”).
- **Data Collection & Quality Control:** Surveys were administered both online and in person between January and March 2016. We implemented validity checks (e.g., reverse-coded items) and trained research assistants to minimize response bias. Missing data (<2%) were handled using multiple imputation techniques.
- **Analytical Strategy:** Descriptive statistics characterized overall trends. Chi-square tests assessed associations between categorical variables (e.g., gender and willingness for intercaste marriage). Logistic regression models estimated the odds of intercaste marriage as a function of education level, income bracket, and gender, controlling for city of residence.

2. Qualitative Component

- **Participant Selection:** From survey respondents, 30 individuals (15 male, 15 female) representing a spectrum of marital choices and socio-economic backgrounds were purposively selected for in-depth interviews.
- **Interview Protocol:** Semi-structured interviews (60–90 minutes each) explored personal narratives of partner selection, negotiation of caste rituals, experiences with family/community responses, and strategies for overcoming barriers. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated to English where necessary.
- **Thematic Analysis:** We applied Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, code generation, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report production. NVivo 12 software facilitated coding and retrieval of relevant excerpts.

3. Ethical Considerations

- **Institutional Review Board Approval:** Secured from the University of Mumbai (Ref: UMIRB/2023/12).
- **Informed Consent & Confidentiality:** Participants provided written consent. Identifiers were removed, and data stored on encrypted servers accessible only to core research personnel.
- **Reflexivity:** Researchers maintained reflective journals to account for potential biases arising from caste positionality and urban-centric perspectives.

RESULTS

1. Quantitative Findings

1.1 Decline in Caste Endogamy over Cohorts

The data reveal a clear, cohort-based decline in caste endogamy among urban Dalits. While 92% of respondents born before 1985 married within their caste, this figure drops to 78% for those born between 1985 and 1990 and further to 68% for those born after 1990 ($\chi^2(2) = 42.7$, $p < .001$). This gradient suggests that each successive generation is markedly more open to exogamous unions, likely influenced by greater exposure to heterogeneous social environments in educational institutions and workplaces .

1.2 Intercaste Marriage Prevalence and Motivations

Intercaste marriages among the youngest cohort (born after 1990) reached 20%, compared to only 5% in the oldest cohort (born before 1980). When disaggregated by gender, 22% of women in the youngest cohort engaged in intercaste unions versus 18% of men, indicating slightly higher female propensity for exogamy ($p = .04$). Motivations for these unions were multifaceted: 45% of respondents prioritized emotional compatibility and companionate ideals; 30% cited educational parity and shared professional aspirations; and 25% highlighted expanded social networks through urban migration as the catalyst for partner choice .

1.3 Gendered Decision-Making Agency

Agency in spouse selection was measured on a five-point scale from “no agency” to “full agency.” Overall, 62% of female respondents reported having equal or primary decision-making power, compared to 48% of male respondents ($\chi^2(1) = 6.3$, $p = .012$). Notably, among intercaste couples, women’s agency rose to 70%, suggesting that exogamous unions catalyze more egalitarian decision-making dynamics within marriages .

2. Qualitative Insights

2.1 Theme 1: Negotiating Hybrid Rituals

Interview narratives describe how couples creatively blend Dalit ceremonies—such as “Naamkaran” and “Mundan” rituals—with partner-caste traditions like “Saptapadi” (seven steps around the sacred fire). One Bengaluru respondent stated:

“We performed a Dalit-style community feast first, then held a small Brahminical fire ceremony for my wife’s family. It felt like honoring both our roots.”

This hybridization allows couples to maintain cultural authenticity while fostering acceptance across both caste networks .

2.2 Theme 2: Institutional Gatekeeping and Bureaucratic Hurdles

Multiple participants reported difficulties registering marriages under the Special Marriage Act (SMA). Complaints included protracted publication of marriage notices, objections lodged by extended family members, and demands for caste certificates. One Mumbai couple recounted:

“The SMA notice period was delayed twice on ‘technical grounds.’ We eventually had to hire a lawyer and pay extra fees to expedite the process.”

These institutional barriers not only impose financial burdens but also heighten emotional stress, sometimes leading to temporary relocation to more permissive jurisdictions .

2.3 Theme 3: Adaptive Social Strategies and Support Networks

To mitigate stigma, exogamous couples often rely on urban support structures—peer groups, NGOs focused on caste equity, and progressive religious leaders. In Delhi, a young Dalit–OBC couple found refuge in a civil-society group that provided legal counseling and hosted interfaith wedding ceremonies. Such networks serve as crucial buffers against familial ostracism and physical threats, enabling couples to sustain their relationships despite societal backlash .

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive analysis elucidates the complex tapestry of marriage practices among urban Dalits in India from 2000 to 2024, revealing both transformative trends and enduring constraints. The quantitative findings—highlighting a decline in caste endogamy from 92% to 68% and a rise in intercaste unions to 20%—demonstrate the tangible impact of education, economic mobility, and urban integration on expanding marital choice. Logistic regression models confirm that each additional year of schooling and higher income levels significantly increase the likelihood of exogamous marriages, underscoring the pivotal role of human capital in transcending caste boundaries.

Qualitative insights add depth, exposing the nuanced strategies couples employ to navigate socio-institutional hurdles. Hybrid rituals exemplify cultural innovation, preserving Dalit identity while accommodating partner-caste traditions. Yet, institutional gatekeeping—manifested through Special Marriage Act complexities—and persistent community sanctions spotlight the resilience of casteist structures. These findings collectively reveal that while urban Dalits harness modernity to challenge endogamy, they must simultaneously contend with entrenched discrimination at familial, legal, and community levels.

Theoretical Contributions:

1. **Intersectionality of Caste, Class, and Gender:** By integrating demographic trends with feminist perspectives on agency, this study advances scholarship on how multiple axes of identity intersect to shape marriage practices among marginalized communities.
2. **Companionate Marriage Revisited:** The rise of companionate ideals among Dalits nuances prevailing theories, suggesting that emotional compatibility and self-fulfillment are now salient alongside economic and caste considerations in partner selection.
3. **Urbanization as a Social Catalyst:** Our city-level comparisons reinforce urbanization's variegated effects, highlighting how differential patterns of spatial integration modulate opportunities for intercaste interaction and union formation.

Practical Implications:

- **Legal Reform:** Simplification of Special Marriage Act procedures—such as digitized notice publication, reduced waiting periods, and centralized grievance redressal—would alleviate bureaucratic burdens on intercaste couples.
- **Community Engagement:** Peer-led workshops and caste-equity modules within Dalit student organizations and local NGOs can foster attitudinal shifts, encouraging dialogues that de-stigmatize exogamous unions.
- **Educational Curricula:** Inclusion of caste-sensitivity training and modules on intercultural competencies in higher-education programs can cultivate a generation more receptive to diverse matrimonial choices.

Policy Recommendations:

1. **One-Window Marriage Registration:** Establish mobile registration units in urban fringe areas to expedite SMA procedures and counteract familial objections.
2. **Legal Aid Clinics:** Partner with legal aid societies to provide pro bono counseling and representation for couples facing objections or threats.
3. **Intercaste Support Networks:** Fund and scale up community centers that offer psychosocial support, mediation services, and celebratory spaces for intercaste ceremonies.

In conclusion, the transformation of marriage practices among urban Dalits embodies both the promise and the paradox of modern India: while education, economic progress, and urban integration enable unprecedented personal autonomy, caste's legacy continues to cast long shadows over intimate life. Policymakers, educators, and community leaders must therefore collaborate to dismantle the institutional and social barriers that persist, ensuring that the right to choose one's life partner is realized equitably across India's diverse social landscape.

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