

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

### **Introduction**

The concept of caste system and religious discrimination are like a bane on the path of India's progress. For centuries Indian society especially Hindu society has been divided on the basis of caste system and religion. 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. The rural parts of the country 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 for the inter-caste marriage in Bombay(Kannan, 1963).

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 needed for incidence of inter-caste marriages. He further observes that inter-caste marriage takes place at fairly advanced age (Reddy et.al, 1984)

Kapadia(1958) in a study of inter-caste marriages in India interviewed 513 university graduates. He 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).

For years Indians had an orthodox mindset. They couldn't imagine marriages beyond the same caste. 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 consequence in terms of violence, social boycott, family boycott and death (honour killing). Even in this twenty first century, honour killing is practised in most parts of India when there are cases of inter-caste marriages. 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, increase in educational level etc., the impact of social forces like caste, religion, various taboos etc. 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, westernization etc. Against this background, therefore, from the researcher's point of view, it will be quite interesting to analyse if there is any changes in marriage patterns in India especially the inter-caste marriages. The available literature on the subject is also scanty. The recently conducted national level survey in India (NFHS-3) gives the information on marriages, castes of women and men in India. This study is an humble attempt in that direction.

## **Objectives**

The main objectives of the study are,

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

## **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 43102 ever married women and their husbands at the national level. Further two culturally contrasting states namely Punjab (583 cases) and Kerala (621 cases) having highest proportion of inter-caste marriages have been analysed separately. Similarly two culturally contrasting states namely Tamil Nadu (3849 cases) and Rajasthan (1483 cases ) having lowest proportion of inter-caste marriages have been analysed separately. Selection of the state is based on the occurrence of inter-caste marriage. The information collected on caste is grouped into four categories namely Scheduled Tribe(ST), Scheduled Caste(SC), Other Backward Classes(OBC) and Others(which includes all the higher castes). The ascending order of class hierarchy in India is ST, SC, OBC and Others. If a woman belonging to higher caste marries to a man belonging to lower caste, then it is considered as an inter-caste marriage. Similarly if a woman belonging to a lower caste marries to a man of higher caste, then also it is considered as inter-caste marriage. In other words the woman marries to a man other than her own caste. In this case a woman belonging to Others has the option to marry a man either from OBC or SC or ST category. If she belongs to OBC, she has only two options namely she may choose her husband either from SC or ST. If the woman belongs to SC category, she can only choose husband from the ST category. Similar is the procedure and available options if the woman belongs to the lower caste(either ST or SC or OBC) and she marries to a man belonging to one of the higher castes(either SC or OBC or Others).

Both bivariate and multivariate analysis have 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 age, residence, education, religion, working status of woman, household structure, standard of living and mass media exposure .

## **Results and Discussion**

Table 1 shows that in India the percentage of inter-caste marriages is about 11 percent out of which in 5.58 percent cases women marry to men of lower caste and in another 5.38 percent cases, the women belongs 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 common 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 about 20 percent inter-caste marriages. For instance intercaste marriage in Punjab is 19.90 percent, in Sikkim it is 20.00 percent, in Goa it is 20.69 percent and in Kerala it is 19.65 percent. The states showing very low percentages of inter-caste marriage are Jammu and Kashmir(4.82 per cent), Rajasthan(3.03 per cent), Chhattisgarh(3.40 per cent), Madhya Pradesh(4.39 per cent), Bihar(6.14 per cent), Meghalaya(2.04 per cent), Nagaland (6.67 per cent) and Tamil Nadu (2.96 per cent). The states having moderate to high inter-caste marriages are Haryana (18.50 per cent), Tripura (16.00 per cent), Gujarat (15.49 per cent), Maharashtra (17.00 per cent) and Karnataka (16.41 per cent). It is quite interesting to note that there is not a single instance of inter-caste marriage in tribal dominated state of Mizoram.

Table 2 shows the percentage distribution of inter-caste marriages in India by background variables. It is found that with the increase in age of the women, there is an overall decline in reported inter-caste marriages 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 modernization and development. Normally it is perceived that education

has 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. The is also true for the husband's education. Religion plays an important role in inter-caste marriages. Muslim women have highest inter-caste marriage followed by Hindus. Almost 14 percent Muslim women have inter-caste marriages out of which 7.83 percent women married to men in lower caste and 6.23 percent women married to men in upper caste. Standard of living index of the women does not have any effect on intercaste marriage because our analysis shows that inter-caste marriage is almost same for the all groups of standard of living. 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.

In Table 3 two culturally contrasting states namely Punjab and Kerala have been analysed where the incidence of inter-caste marriage is high. The data reveals that in Punjab for the age group 15-19, inter-caste marriage is almost 35 percent out of which women of lower caste marrying men from higher caste is almost 26 percent. It appears that young women in Punjab are more empowered and broad in outlook due to which they choose a mate from other than their own caste. In Kerala, for the same age group inter-caste marriage is found in 25 percent of the women. Place of residence also has an effect on inter-caste marriage. It is high in urban areas than the rural areas for both the states. Illiterate women have more inter-caste marriage than literate women. For example inter-caste marriage among illiterate women is 32 percent for Punjab and 40 percent for Kerala. In both the states inter-caste marriage is highest for the Hindus. In Punjab inter-caste marriage among Muslims is almost 18 percent and in all the cases women belonging to higher caste marry to men belonging to lower caste. It is also observed that in nuclear families inter-caste marriage is high in Punjab. But the same is not true for Kerala where inter-caste marriage is high in joint families. Inter-caste marriage is high for the working women in Punjab and not working women in Kerala. For instance inter-caste marriage is almost 28 percent for working women and almost 18 percent for the not working women in Punjab. The figure for Kerala is 19 percent for the not working women and almost 18 percent for the working women . With the increase in standard of

living, inter-caste marriage is decreasing for both the states. For example inter-caste marriage is almost 37 percent for Punjab and almost 27 percent for the Kerala under the category of low standard of living. For the category of high standard of living, the figure is 18 percent for Punjab and almost 17 percent for the Kerala. Mass media exposure has negative effect on inter-caste marriage.

Table 4 shows the percentage distribution of women marrying man of different castes in two of the low prevailing states of India namely Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan. In Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan percentage of women marrying in same caste is almost 97 percent. In both the states percentage of inter-caste marriage is very low. Percentage of women having highest inter-caste marriages belong to the age group 25-29 (almost 4 percent) in Tamil Nadu and 30-34 age group in Rajasthan. In rural areas of Tamil Nadu the prevalence of inter-caste marriages is higher than in urban areas. Both in Tamil Nadu as well as in Rajasthan inter-caste marriage is relatively higher for the more educated women than the other categories. Religion is an important factor influencing inter-caste marriage as in both the states it is high for the other religious group than Hindus and Muslims. For example 7 percent marriages in Tamil Nadu and almost 15 percent marriages in Rajasthan which are inter-caste belong to other religious group. Inter-caste marriage is almost same for the working and non working women and also there is no difference for various standard of living index of the women. Mass media exposure also affects inter-caste marriage. It is highest for the women having full exposure in Tamil Nadu but in Rajasthan is highest for the women having partial exposure.

### ***Results of Logistic regression analysis***

To find out the controlled effect of socio-economic 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, age, place of residence, husband's education and religion are showing significant effect on inter-caste marriage whereas women's education, household structure, respondent's work status, standard of living and mass media exposure do not have any significant effect on inter-caste marriage. Age has

negative effect on inter-caste marriage. In urban area 14 percent women are more likely to have inter-caste marriage than in rural areas. Husband's education also has negative effect on inter-caste marriage. Husbands with higher education are 25 percent less likely to have inter-caste marriage than illiterate husband. The likelihood of having inter-caste marriage is less for the women of other religion than the Hindu women.

Age has a negative effect on inter-caste marriage, with the increase in age inter-caste marriage is declines. But it is significant only for the state of Tamil Nadu. Place of residence shows significant effect on inter-caste marriage in all the states except Kerala. For example likelihood of having inter-caste marriage is 69 percent higher in Punjab, two times high in Tamil Nadu and almost 4.5 times high in Rajasthan for urban women as compared to rural women. Secondary educated women are less likely to have inter-caste marriage than illiterate women in Tamil Nadu. Religion also plays an important role in inter-caste marriage. Women belonging to Muslim and other religious groups are less likely to have inter-caste marriages than Hindus in Kerala. In Tamil Nadu almost three and half times more women have inter-caste marriage belonging to other religion than Hindus. Household structure does not have any significant effect on inter-caste marriage in all the states under consideration. Working women are 78 percent more likely to have inter-caste marriage than non-working women in Punjab. Standard of living index shows negative effect on inter-caste marriage and it is significant for Punjab and Tamil Nadu. For instant in Punjab 57 percent medium class and 66 percent high class women are less likely to have inter-caste marriage than low class women. Similarly in Tamil Nadu 46 percent high class women are less likely to have inter-caste marriage than the women belonging to low class.

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

State	Women marrying men			Total
	of same caste	of lower caste than her caste	of upper caste than her caste	
<b>India</b>	89.04	5.58	5.38	43102
<b>North</b>	89.83	5.34	4.83	3313
Delhi	87.08	5.90	7.01	271
Haryana	81.50	10.57	7.93	492
Himachal Pradesh	86.96	6.52	6.52	138
Jammu and Kashmir	95.18	3.01	1.81	166
Punjab	80.10	9.95	9.95	583
Rajasthan	96.97	1.75	1.28	1483
Uttaranchal	86.74	6.08	7.18	181
<b>Central</b>	90.16	5.54	4.30	11572
Chhattisgarh	96.60	1.30	2.11	617
Madhya Pradesh	95.61	2.33	2.06	1799
Uttar Pradesh	88.66	6.44	4.89	9155
<b>East</b>	90.94	4.69	4.37	5606
Bihar	93.86	2.52	3.62	1629
Jharkhand	88.11	6.10	5.79	639
Orissa	88.42	6.19	5.39	1002
West Bengal	90.75	5.18	4.07	2335
<b>North East</b>	89.20	5.98	4.82	1037
Arunachal Pradesh	92.59	3.70	3.70	27
Assam	88.94	6.07	4.98	642
Manipur	87.70	8.20	4.10	122
Meghalaya	97.96	0.00	2.04	49
Mizoram	100.00	0.00	0.00	20
Nagaland	93.33	2.67	4.00	75
Sikkim	80.00	13.33	6.67	15
Tripura	84.00	9.00	7.00	100
<b>West</b>	83.25	7.38	9.38	7647
Goa	79.31	10.34	10.34	29
Gujarat	84.51	8.07	7.42	1401
Maharashtra	83.00	7.19	9.81	6216
<b>South</b>	90.29	5.02	4.68	13917
Andhra Pradesh	91.17	3.72	5.11	5753
Karnataka	83.59	9.34	7.07	3693
Kerala	80.35	12.24	7.41	621
Tamil Nadu	97.04	1.66	1.30	3849

**Table 2: Percentage distribution of women marrying men of different castes by background variables in India**

Background Characteristics	Women marrying men			Total
	of same caste	of lower caste than her caste	of upper caste than her caste	
<b>Age</b>				
15-19	88.24	5.69	6.07	2636
20-24	89.27	5.67	5.06	7621
25-29	88.21	6.12	5.67	8872
30-34	88.32	6.26	5.43	8440
35-39	89.46	5.23	5.31	7246
40-44	89.62	4.58	5.80	5329
45-49	91.55	4.39	4.06	2959
<b>Place of Residence</b>				
Urban	88.38	6.12	5.50	14465
Rural	89.36	5.31	5.32	28639
<b>Education of Women</b>				
No education	89.16	5.74	5.09	19907
Primary	88.49	5.02	6.49	6596
Secondary	88.75	5.79	5.46	14013
Higher	90.89	4.71	4.40	2590
<b>Husband's Education</b>				
No education	89.27	5.36	5.38	11292
Primary	88.81	5.45	5.73	7133
Secondary	88.48	5.89	5.63	19337
Higher	91.10	4.89	4.01	5014
<b>Religion</b>				
Hindu	89.39	5.33	5.29	35969
Muslim	85.91	7.83	6.26	4891
others	90.11	4.81	5.08	2244
<b>Household structure</b>				
Nuclear	89.22	5.50	5.28	23183
Non nuclear	88.80	5.68	5.52	19492
<b>Working Status</b>				
Not Working	88.98	5.82	5.20	25931
Working	89.16	5.20	5.64	17110
<b>Standard of Living Index</b>				
Low	89.19	5.62	5.20	9931
Medium	89.02	5.57	5.41	14649
High	89.05	5.53	5.42	17364
<b>Mass Media Exposure</b>				
No Exposure	89.24	5.38	5.38	15511
Partial Exposure	88.66	5.81	5.53	24065
Full Exposure	90.59	4.96	4.45	3530
<b>Total</b>	<b>89.03</b>	<b>5.59</b>	<b>5.38</b>	<b>43106</b>

**Table 3: Percentage distribution of women marrying men of different castes by background variables in Punjab and Kerala**

Background Characteristics	Punjab			Kerala		
	of same caste	of lower caste than her caste	of upper caste than her caste	of same caste	of lower caste than her caste	of upper caste than her caste
<b>Age</b>						
15-19	68.42	5.26	26.32	75.00	12.50	12.50
20-24	76.58	9.91	13.51	79.03	16.13	4.84
25-29	76.56	12.50	10.94	76.70	13.59	9.71
30-34	86.92	10.00	3.08	82.27	12.77	4.96
35-39	80.62	10.85	8.53	82.84	8.21	8.96
40-44	80.58	8.74	10.68	77.78	11.97	10.26
45-49	80.95	6.35	12.70	83.64	14.55	1.82
<b>Place of Residence</b>						
Urban	77.62	11.54	10.84	78.06	14.35	7.59
Rural	81.91	8.79	9.30	81.72	10.97	7.31
<b>Education of Women</b>						
No education	78.19	13.58	8.23	60.00	20.00	20.00
Primary	73.81	10.71	15.48	81.43	12.86	5.71
Secondary	80.54	8.72	10.74	78.49	13.48	8.04
Higher	94.83	0.00	5.17	90.65	5.61	3.74
<b>Husband's Education</b>						
No education	77.27	13.64	9.09	64.71	11.76	23.53
Primary	74.36	12.82	12.82	70.18	16.67	13.16
Secondary	80.20	8.91	10.89	81.84	11.94	6.22
Higher	92.65	5.88	1.47	89.53	8.14	2.33
<b>Religion</b>						
Hindu	77.56	12.54	9.90	76.53	16.00	7.47
Muslim	84.21	15.79	0.00	84.96	8.27	6.77
others	81.94	7.50	10.56	87.50	4.46	8.04
<b>Household structure</b>						
Nuclear	77.59	12.71	9.70	81.03	12.22	6.75
Non nuclear	82.59	7.92	9.50	79.53	12.42	8.05
<b>Working Status</b>						
Not Working	82.07	8.51	9.42	79.57	13.46	6.97
Working	71.76	16.03	12.21	81.86	9.80	8.33
<b>Standard of Living Index</b>						
Low	62.96	18.52	18.52	73.08	11.54	15.38
Medium	76.12	16.42	7.46	74.15	14.97	10.88
High	82.25	7.89	9.86	83.10	11.19	5.71
<b>Mass Media Exposure</b>						
No Exposure	75.63	14.29	10.08	71.19	18.64	10.17
Partial Exposure	80.46	9.20	10.34	80.30	11.69	8.01
Full Exposure	88.10	7.14	4.76	85.86	11.11	3.03
<b>Total</b>	<b>80.09</b>	<b>9.96</b>	<b>9.96</b>	<b>80.32</b>	<b>12.26</b>	<b>7.42</b>

**Table 4: Percentage distribution of women marrying men of different castes by background variables in Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan**

Background Characteristics	Tamil Nadu			Rajasthan		
	of same caste	of lower caste than her caste	of upper caste than her caste	of same caste	of lower caste than her caste	of upper caste than her caste
<b>Age</b>						
15-19	98.68	0.00	1.32	96.43	3.57	0.00
20-24	96.93	2.05	1.02	97.45	0.64	1.91
25-29	96.19	2.44	1.37	96.28	2.66	1.06
30-34	96.70	2.25	1.05	95.73	3.66	0.61
35-39	96.51	1.27	2.22	97.64	0.00	2.36
40-44	98.25	1.10	0.66	99.12	0.88	0.00
45-49	99.13	0.00	0.87	95.71	0.00	4.29
<b>Place of Residence</b>						
Urban	97.20	1.69	1.11	93.63	3.00	3.37
Rural	96.89	1.62	1.50	98.36	1.32	0.33
<b>Education of Women</b>						
No education	97.08	1.39	1.52	97.82	1.51	0.67
Primary	97.05	1.74	1.20	95.24	2.86	1.90
Secondary	97.26	1.44	1.30	94.85	2.21	2.94
Higher	96.04	3.24	0.72	92.31	2.56	5.13
<b>Husband's Education</b>						
No education	96.58	1.71	1.71	98.23	1.77	0.00
Primary	96.81	1.16	2.03	96.48	2.11	1.41
Secondary	97.16	1.90	0.95	95.97	1.73	2.31
Higher	97.66	1.46	0.88	96.12	1.94	1.94
<b>Religion</b>						
Hindu	97.31	1.42	1.28	97.50	1.58	0.92
Muslim	97.14	1.90	0.95	94.00	3.00	3.00
others	93.10	4.93	1.97	84.62	7.69	7.69
<b>Household structure</b>						
Nuclear	97.23	1.21	1.56	96.45	2.37	1.18
Non nuclear	96.45	2.86	0.69	97.54	1.12	1.34
<b>Respondent currently working</b>						
No	96.96	1.78	1.26	96.58	1.50	1.92
Yes	97.12	1.51	1.37	97.30	1.97	0.74
<b>Standard of Living Index</b>						
Low	96.71	1.32	1.98	96.89	3.11	0.00
Medium	96.64	1.64	1.72	97.73	1.62	0.65
High	97.61	1.92	0.48	96.41	1.10	2.49
<b>Mass Media Exposure</b>						
No Exposure	96.69	1.78	1.53	97.62	1.98	0.40
Partial Exposure	97.35	1.41	1.24	95.58	1.77	2.65
Full Exposure	95.91	2.80	1.29	96.88	0.00	3.13
<b>Total</b>	<b>97.03</b>	<b>1.65</b>	<b>1.31</b>	<b>96.91</b>	<b>1.83</b>	<b>1.26</b>

**Table 5: Logistic regression analysis of inter-caste marriages in India and selective states**

Explanatory Variables	Exp(B)				
	India	Punjab	Kerala	Tamil Nadu	Rajasthan
<b>Age</b>	0.990***	0.989	0.989	.969**	0.993
<b>Place of Residence</b>					
Rural®					
Urban	1.143***	1.694**	1.368	2.154***	4.499***
<b>Education of Women</b>					
No education®					
Primary	1.025	1.604	0.425	0.764	1.496
Secondary	1.033	1.115	0.699	0.628*	1.771
Higher	0.876	0.347	0.361	0.649	4.868
<b>Husband's Education</b>					
No education®					
Primary	1.049	1.268	0.727	0.949	2.034
Secondary	1	1.092	0.375	0.898	2.186
Higher	0.753***	0.528	0.317	0.926	0.71
<b>Religion</b>					
Hindu®					
Muslim	1.077	0.529	.460**	0.985	2.151
others	.580***	1.015	.389**	3.444***	4.298
<b>Household structure</b>					
Non nuclear®					
Nuclear	0.974	1.118	0.853	0.835	1.275
<b>Respondent currently working</b>					
No®					
Yes	1.007	1.787**	0.831	0.882	1.464
<b>Standard of Living Index</b>					
Low®					
Medium	1.032	.433*	0.999	0.946	0.447
High	0.948	.341**	0.864	.546**	0.442
<b>Mass Media Exposure</b>					
No Exposure®					
Partial Exposure	1.088	1.081	0.681	1.067	0.723
Full Exposure	1.045	0.791	0.475	1.246	0.298

Note: Dependent Variable: 0-no intercaste marriage, 1- intercaste marriage

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

® Reference category