

Himal Southasian

# Bridesourcing

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One man's mission to save the Havyaka Brahmins from extinction.



*'Dhare' – giving away of the bride*

On December 21, the day that the Mayans prophesised the world would end, my little cousin got married. At the age of 23, he still likes sleeping on his mother's lap and enjoys being pampered by his older cousins. The family is very well off, the lineage well-respected in the region. He lives with his parents and looks after a vast family estate. A frantic search for his potential bride started the day he turned 21. Let me explain.

This is the latest, albeit rare, triumph that I am hearing about in my community. Here is my full disclosure: I was born into the Havyaka Brahmin community, the coastal Karnataka wing of a sub-caste of Brahmins, supposedly perched on the top rung of an already tall caste order. The Havyakas have their own dialect, a version of Old Kannada. Their cuisine is distinct from those of other Brahmins. Shredded coconut is used in nearly everything, perhaps because of coastal influence. An array of traditional recipes for jackfruit, raw banana and breadfruit makes the Havyaka kitchen unique.

Even within the community, differences are evident; the Havyakas of central Karnataka have another dialect, different cuisine and less rigid practices.

Ideally, the Havyakas wouldn't marry other Brahmins. Everyone else is a 'step down'. The liberals do occasionally go as far as forging alliances with the *Trimathasthas*; the Havyakas, along with the Shivalli Brahmins and the Kota Brahmins, make up the trinity of this Brahmin 'elitedom'. This rigidity is what is giving the community much grief.

My grouse arises from the community's regressive ideas about women, so rooted that the dialect assigns only a neuter 'it' to the female gender. Mind you, this wisdom comes from a supposedly learned class! I mock the irony every time an uncle or his son – brought up to be just like him – makes a flippant comment about women. Sometimes social obligations stifle my urge to break out into a feminist outcry. I hate that!

The point is that a very large number of Havyaka men remain unmarried, mainly because they are not in professions that are glamorous enough; many of them still live with their parents, and the fact that the sex ratio is skewed. Girls these days couldn't be bothered to put up with the in-laws, often referred to as *Rahu-Ketu* or the inauspicious ones. While the Havyakas are known for giving preferential treatment to their sons, the daughters are well-loved too. There has never been a recorded case of female foeticide or infanticide within the community. I cannot find an explanation for the skewed sex ratio.

Traditionally, Havyakas have mostly been farmers, chefs and priests. Today they are more likely to be found in universities and software companies around the world. Those who continue with family occupations have the hardest time finding brides. A prospective groom living in a village might as well sign away his dreams of ever starting a family. Therefore, the Havyaka 'race', a pure Aryan one according to M G Sathyanarayana, is on the verge of extinction.

### **Kashmir to Karnataka**

Sathyanarayana is a man on a mission. He is trying to single-handedly 'save' the Havyaka community from going the 'Parsi way'. He leads a group of 'social workers', which arrived at a conclusion that since both the Havyakas and Kashmiri Pandits were 'pure races', they could inter-marry. The group, known as Kashyapa Yuva Brahmin

Vedike, is involved in sourcing fair and beautiful Kashmiri Pandit girls as brides for Havyaka Brahmin men. It is framed as a win-win situation; the Pandits will find a way out of their refugee plight while the Havyakas will find brides for their men.



*A container filled with rice and jaggery, to be knocked over by a bride as she enters her new home.*

When I called him, Sathyanarayana was in Benaras scouting for girls to bring back to Sullia in Dakshina Kannada, some 2000 kilometres away. I didn't tell him about my connection with the community although, half-way through our conversation, I sensed that he was itching to ask me about my caste. He proceeded to give me an introduction to the Havyakas and I pretended to take notes. I was horrified as he explained the economics of his trade.

Sathyanarayana told me that he was surprised when he found out that about 3000 Havyaka men between the ages of 22 and 45 who wanted to get married were having trouble finding brides. There were many others who wouldn't openly admit their inability to find someone. "As of now we have 384 men ready to get married to any girl as long as she is a vegetarian. We have stopped taking on more names now until we finish a trial round of marriages," Sathyanarayana told me, proudly. He also seemed somewhat worried by the Jammu and Kashmir government's recent pledge to rehabilitate Kashmiri Pandits. The Pandits have become hesitant to take up offers

from his organisation. “But when has the government ever done anything it has promised? We are still hopeful,” he added.

“But isn’t their culture, food, language, wholly different?”, I asked. Sathyanarayana, I imagined, was shaking his head vigorously over the phone as he told me to look at history. “Over 600 years ago, we all came from the same Sindhu Valley, the Kashmiri Pandits and us Havyakas. We came down to the south with Shankaracharya. We all have the same religious beliefs and customs,” he insisted. Sathyanarayana believed that getting many Kashmiri Pandit girls to marry local boys would also help. The girls would be able to find a sense of community in Sullia and wouldn’t miss their hometowns as much.

Meanwhile, he was getting some papers ready to bring down ten families to Sullia to meet some prospective Havyaka grooms. I was told that the train charges for a girl and her parents, plus other expenses, add up to INR 45,000. Each girl gets to meet at least three guys. Once a match is made, the groom’s family has to pay for all the expenses. The other two need not despair, as “they will get another chance to see a girl,” Sathyanarayana said, rather benevolently.

- There are approximately 4.5 to 5 lakh Havyaka families, Sathyanarayana told me. They live primarily along the Konkan coast, from Karwar to Kannur, but also in parts of central Karnataka. Sathyanarayana denied that the sex ratio is skewed and claimed that there are 93 girls for every 100 boys. I could not disprove his claims; the census figures do not account for this sub-caste. He blamed changes in attitude for the plight of the Havyaka men, holding education responsible for encouraging girls to make their own decisions. I was reminded of a girl who, amidst the theatrics of meeting boys for an arranged marriage, refused to marry my cousin. She was condemned by my aunts for her behaviour. Imagine a girl saying no!

Sathyanarayana, and many others like him, believe that integration with the other pure Aryan races will help develop the communities and preserve purity. “Brahmins are known for cleanliness, for discipline and intelligence. We have to ensure that the community does not disappear,” he told me. There was something fundamentally disturbing about Sathyanarayana’s objectification of women, coated with his arrogance of being from a ‘superior race’ that is making great sacrifices to uplift and protect ‘pure blood’.

While I am a Havyaka Brahmin by birth, I have no sympathy for the perils that my community perceives itself to be facing. I want to feel vindictive for remarks I have seen passed around by the male elders and for every time I have been referred to as an 'it'. The buying of brides isn't uncommon in other parts of the country, and even in other parts of the world. But when you hear the stories from inside your own house and get to listen in on the business dealings, it is a different feeling altogether. You cannot help but feel the blow of being the perpetrator, and the victim, of the derision of womankind.

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