

Dalits and Inter-Caste Marriage

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(This article is extracted from one of my research papers)

Is the personal, political?

Perhaps, we don't disagree with this radical viewpoint of feminism i.e. personal is political. If this is so, then personal choices are also political in nature. Therefore, there is no personal arena into which academic research cannot penetrate. Marriage has been one such area which has been perceived to be a space for religious significance. (Samita Sen, Ranjita Biswas, Nandita Dhawan, 2011) Marriage and other forms of intimate relationships are considered to be impenetrable private spaces of individuals. The study of politics that operates within these private spheres is, therefore perceived to be an unpleasant intrusion. While the traditional understanding tries to protect the sanctity of marriage, the modern understanding of marriage implies that the privacy of this space should be respected. But the notions of gender, race, class, caste and community continue to determine the power-relations within and around marriage/intimate relationships. Domestic violence, marital rapes are a few examples of how gender politics and power operate in this space. Therefore, the power relations determined by caste/class positions in inter-caste marriages could also be explored.

The genesis of this piece lies in the informal discussions among various circles of dalit feminists.¹ Those discussions threw up an interesting observation that a considerable number of dalit ideologues and educated dalit men marry Brahmin/upper-caste women as against the miniscule number of educated dalit women who marry outside their caste.² Even the recent critically acclaimed film *Masaan* portrays romantic "love" relationship between a young educated dalit man and an upper-caste middle class woman. This was definitely food for thought.

Traditional View on Inter-caste Marriage

I present here some of the traditional ideologies that act as built-in deterrents to inter-caste marriages in Hindu society. Endogamy is the significant feature of the caste

system. However, the freedom allowed to upper-caste men with regard to exogamy and polygamy is apparent throughout history. (Sarkar, 1995) According to Hindu scriptures, a Brahmin/upper-caste man is allowed casual sexual access to lower caste women but giving the status of wife/chief wife is considered offensive due to "impure" caste and gender position of lower-caste and untouchable women.³ On the other hand, the Brahmin/ upper-caste woman is confined to caste endogamous marriage and is trapped within the ideology of wifely devotion (*Pativrata Dharma*). (Geeta, 1999.) Caste purity is ensured through the protection of woman's sexual purity. Hence, upper caste women are considered to be the "gateways of caste purity". (Chakravarti, 2003) This traditional understanding implies that dalit woman is impure in terms of sexuality due to her caste position which does not provide protection over her sexual purity and also because upper-caste male's sexual access to dalit women has "customary sanctions". (Tharu and Niranjana, 1999) But the protection of sexual purity of upper-caste women determines the superior position of upper-caste women within the ideology of purity/pollution with regard to Hindu female sexuality.

This paper tries to explore the grounds for the contemporary understanding of inter-caste marriage among dalits, and to what extent they subvert the age-old Hindu cultural values/Shastras, so vehemently criticized by Phule and Ambedkar.

According to Ambedkar, as Sharmila Rege describes in *Against The Madness of Manu*, "...no one's 'private sphere'_ not even that of Gods _is free from critique." (Rege, 2013)

Thus Ambedkar not only unraveled the private spheres of Rama and Krishna but also studied the politics of their private spheres in "Riddles of Rama and Krishna". This presents an opportunity to politicize the private sphere of marriage that the emerging middle class dalits have 'personalised' since a long time.

Ambedkar on Endogamy and Private Sphere of Marriage

While not disagreeing with the fact that inter-caste marriage as Ambedkar proposed is a significant solution to the caste question, understanding the politics around the present day inter-caste marriages is an attempt to relook into dalit ideology. Contemporary dalit ideology promotes inter-caste marriage to subvert caste-endogamy, a central tenet of Hindu society. But not all inter-caste marriages are in the spirit of Ambedkar's views expressed in *Annihilation of Caste*.

While many dalit ideologues and educated dalit men promote and practice inter-caste marriage, dalit women on the other hand have voiced their experiences of untouchability and caste discrimination after being married to upper-caste men. Chandra Sri who married an upper-caste man, describes her experiences of caste discrimination within her matrimonial home. (Shyamala, 2003) Similarly, it is not uncommon to find educated dalit women who have been sexually exploited by upper-caste men but rejected for marriage. Hence, it is important to look at the equation between educated dalit men and women vis-à-vis the practice of inter-caste marriage -- perceived to be an act proposed by Ambedkar.

The act of highly educated dalit men opting for inter-caste marriage can be read in different ways. It can be seen as the "rejection of rejection" (Gopal Guru, 2013) to reject the traditional ideology that dalit men can have no access to upper-caste women. At times, marriages between dalits and upper- castes help to transcend the caste identity of

dalits in the spaces of higher education where the political awareness is apparent. A dalit man's inter-caste marriage in many cases would not only bring him visibility among the "progressive" upper-castes but also gives him accessibility to upper-caste groups.⁴ Another important aspect involved in this is Ambedkar's theorization of caste endogamy as the basis for continuity of caste in Annihilation of Caste. I disagree to see the contemporary situation through the spectrum of Ambedkar's proposal of inter-marriage for two reasons. Firstly, Ambedkar proposed amalgamation of castes and deliberate deconstruction of Hindu sentiments related to caste purity. But most of the educated dalits have married women from Brahmin/upper castes and there are not many dalit men who married women from OBC castes or other dalit sub-castes.⁵ A few dalit scholars have also inter-married among dalit sub-castes and such marriages have political significance.⁶

Second reason for my disagreement with considering their marriage as Ambedkarite marriage is that not all educated men/women have taken up the responsibility of politicizing their marriage, in fact they have chosen to push it behind the curtains of "personal choice". If it is to deconstruct the caste system, dalits should make a political statement about their choice of marriage. Marrying only upper-caste women is not the solution to the caste question. If inter-caste marriage, as understood by many dalits, is the solution to the caste question, dalit women rarely find themselves a part of such subversion because of their position as a dalit and a woman. The relatively low number of dalit women engaging in inter-caste marriages shows the prevalence of the "graded patriarchy" in Hindu society (Chakravarti, 2003). An upper-caste woman, perceived to be "pure" both sexually and caste-wise, has become the desired subject of the educated dalit men, which I would discuss later in detail. On the other hand, educated dalit women, often endure sexual exploitation by upper-caste men vainly hoping to be accorded the position of a wife. Hence, the problem is not with Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste but with the way it has been perceived and interpreted. Ambedkar never advocated the idea of individual dalits to fall in "love" with upper-castes and fight/convince their families for the inter-caste marriage. In fact, Ambedkar put forward a conditional and rational promotion of this practice in the context where there is no involvement of "love" or "personal choice" in Hindu marriage due to the caste system.

To agitate for and to organise inter-caste dinners and inter-caste marriages is like forced feeding brought about by artificial means. Make every man and woman free from the thralldom of the **Shastras**, cleanse their minds of the pernicious notions founded on the **Shastras**, and he or she will inter-dine and inter-marry, without your telling him or her to do so." (Ambedkar, 1937)

Hence, the inter-caste marriages of many highly educated dalits has no significance according to Ambedkar because such marriages have not subverted the spirit of caste system or happened only between the man and woman who have completely cleansed themselves from the evils of caste system. The visible basis for these marriages is mostly "love" and education and mobility of dalits on the scale of class. Hence, the upper-caste women who marry dalit men may not necessarily be the ones who disagree with the Hindu Shastras. It could be more due to their "love" or because the particular

dalit man has the qualities of "merit"/education/class which may give him access to upper-castes.

Therefore, caste may continue to operate within the marriage or intimate relations which again keeps the dalit woman at the receiving end of oppression. An upper-caste man, who has not deliberately refuted caste ideology, may consider a dalit woman inferior to be his socially acceptable wife. A dalit man's position in inter-caste marriage may differ from that of a dalit woman due to the superiority of gender and also because the male sexual purity is not mandatory. At what level caste operates (if a dalit man marries a woman who had not refuted caste ideology) in their marriage is a subject that has to be explored.⁷

Conditions of Dalit Women on "Campus"

The number of dalit women in the higher educational institutions is abysmally low when compared to dalit men because as Ruth Manorama says, dalit women are dalits among dalits. (Bandhu, 2005) It takes a harder journey of life for dalit women to enter the space of higher education.⁸ In fact, there is no visible and pre-constructed space for dalit women in many institutions where the visible women's groups on the campuses are generally feminist groups with overt practices of assertions like smoking and consumption of alcohol along with some particular dress codes. These visible assertions of smoking and consumption of alcohol is not prominent among middle class dalit women on campus. If dalit women students do assert their freedom in terms of sexuality, it is considered offensive both to the dalits and upper-castes.

Upper-caste teachers, administration and the students either show their strong contempt for dalits (evident in the high suicide rate of dalit students on various campuses across the country) or patronize them as "collective victims". These two notions have become too prominent in the institutions. This patronization not only stereotypes dalits but is also problematic to middle class dalits and dalit women in particular. The lower class dalit is more acceptable as a dalit because he is a visible bearer of dalithood on his body and at times in his "merit".⁹ If a middle class dalit shows up a considerable amount of resistance by wearing better clothing and accessories, he/she is subverting the very idea of the dalit body.¹⁰ As long as the patronization process continues, upper-castes can still enjoy their power because they are in control of their own charity or reform to be done to whom and to what extent. The more assertive a dalit is, the more is the resistance from the upper-castes.

If a middle class dalit woman asserts her sexual freedom, it appears to be a dichotomy between the image of the dalit woman as a "victim of sexual exploitation" and the empirical feminist assertion of the dalit woman. Therefore, such assertion is mostly attributed to their moral degradation which reinforces the traditional views on lower caste woman's sexuality. While the assertive mainstream feminist is respected, the assertive dalit woman is mostly condemned both by upper-castes and dalit male groups. The reason being the visible assertion of feminist students is understood to be the result of superiority of their caste/class and urban life (the acceptance is shaped more by these power structures) where as the dalit middle class woman is expected to reject sexuality to fit the stereotyped image of a victim of caste based sexual violence. The response of dalits on campus is worth discussing because the prevailing view is that dalit women are

victims of rape, molestation and violence in public space. It is also believed that while grass root dalit women go through such violence in the villages, educated middle class dalit women assert sexual freedom. Many dalit groups consider such assertion as a mere consent to their own sexual exploitation.¹¹

This gives way to the idea that dalit woman should shut all the doors of sexuality because every sexual act she experiences only involves violence and exploitation. It is true that many grass root dalit women face sexual violence at the hands of upper-castes. The educated dalit women are the representatives of such millions of grassroots dalit women, who have taken up the responsibility of fighting caste and casteist patriarchy. At times educated dalit women also may fall prey to the sexual exploitation. Yet, the larger support that the upper-caste feminist can draw in such contexts is much more than the dalit women who are left without support even from male dalit groups. Educated dalit woman's sexuality is not an extension of the grass root dalit woman's sexuality. It is only a historical and metaphorical connection that exists between the grass root dalit woman and the middle class educated dalit woman. By stereotyping her as a rape victim, the historical and metaphorical relation is made to be a realistic and empirical connection. Against this backdrop we need to compare the difference between the consequences of the assertion of sexuality by upper-caste women and dalit women. Though a "rape victim" can assert sexual freedom, such assertion would jeopardize her victimhood. Similarly, dalit woman's assertion would contradict her stereotyped image of a victim and therefore prevent her from gaining any support.

This understanding is carefully crafted within the realm of intersections of caste and gender structures. While the "purity" of the upper-caste woman is determined by the superior caste position due to the historical fact of the protection of her sexual purity, the "impure" status of dalit women is determined by lack of the same protection or control over her sexuality. Hence, the upper-caste woman figure is a signifier of caste and sexual purity. Her indulgence in smoking, consumption of alcohol or even sexual relationships is individual loss of purity but the structural purity determined by her caste would uphold her superiority.¹² Lack of protection over dalit woman's sexual purity has been misrepresented as her own "sexual freedom" in some cases.¹³ This leads to considering dalit women as immoral. It reinforces the traditional ideology that dalit women are sexually impure. The metaphors of upper-caste woman figure and dalit woman have connotative meanings of "purity" and "pollution".

When dalit women assert their sexuality, they are less likely to gain such support or empathy of the progressive upper-castes because within the parameters of higher educational institutions, assertion of sexuality is an assertion of power which is often the privilege of upper-caste feminists. While the educated dalit men mostly marry upper-caste women, dalit women often fail to gain political support from dalit male groups. This substantiates the dalit man's (or even dalit ideology's) inability to accept a dalit woman as an intellectual/political partner and not a body that carries virginity and caste/sexual purity.

Conclusion

In my understanding there is another important aspect to inter-caste marriages of educated dalit men. An educated dalit man is no more a grassroots dalit but an

exceptional dalit who has distinguished himself from his people. The dalit man's achievements in education free him from his traditional occupation and lifestyle. Hence, upper-caste women may marry educated dalit men. The object of desire for a dalit man is a "pure" caste and gendered body i.e an upper-caste woman. By marrying an upper-caste woman, a dalit man is able to escape a minor part of his caste position. Whereas the dalit woman being a woman lacks power in relation to both the structures of caste and patriarchy, her position is completely inferior in a marriage with an upper-caste man.

I would like to discuss the concept of objectification in the context where it does not necessarily involve humiliation. Objectification is defined, discussed and problematised in various contexts.

Objectification is treating as a mere thing of what is really not a thing. It has multiple aspects, including the denial of autonomy and subjectivity, and the ideas of ownership, of fungibility (one is just like the others), and violability (it's all right to break the thing up or abuse it). Not all forms of objectification possess all these features: for example, one may treat a fine painting as an object, thus denying its autonomy and subjectivity, without holding that it is all right to break it up. In the domain of human relations, however, sinister connections begin to be woven among these different aspects. At the heart of all of them, I would argue, is the idea of instrumentality: a thing, unlike a person, is an instrument or means to the ends of persons; it is not an end in itself. The objectification of women is primarily a denial that women are ends in themselves. It is because one has already made that denial, at some level of one's awareness, that it becomes so easy to deny women autonomy, to deny that their subjective experience matters, and, even, to begin to ignore qualitative differences between one and another, as pornography so easily does. (Nussbaum, 2007, pp. 105-106)

As women are not ends in themselves, disgracing a woman would mean the disgrace of community/caste or family that she belongs to. (Martha. C. Nussbaum, 2007) Similarly, as the upper-caste woman's body consists of the purity of caste, it becomes the object of desire for the dalit male. Here, I would extend the idea of objectification in the context of purity/pollution related to both caste and sexuality of women.

In my understanding of objectification, access to an upper-caste woman is access to her caste for a dalit man. This would also bring honour to his masculinity that in spite of being a dalit, he could marry an upper-caste woman who is symbolic of purity due to her caste position, which may be absent for his own caste position and for the women of his own caste. Objectification in the context of dalit male's marriage or cohabitation with upper-caste women is an expression of his access to a pure caste and gendered body.

Notes

[1]. I thank all the dalit feminists for lighting up the discussion on marriage.

[2]. Though, I have not come across any contemporary statistical data with regard to the number of educated dalit men appropriated inter-caste marriages, there are many dalit ideologues and well-known dalit intellectuals and scholars who inter-married. I have taken a few interviews of both (highly educated) dalit men and women for my research.

Most of the arguments presented in this paper are the observations from the interviews taken by me.

[3]. Though there were a few instances in the Hindu scriptures discussing the lower caste woman's relationship with Brahmin and Kshatriya man, lower caste women are not given the status of wife/chief wife; they live as concubines rather wives. Harischandra refuses to marry Matanga Kanyas. Krishna marries Kshatriya women where as Yadava (lower caste Hindu) women remain his concubines. See Vizia Bharati, 1995. Also see Sharmila Rege, 2013.

[4]. A highly educated middle aged dalit man, a government employee from a small town in Andhra Pradesh that I interviewed for my research on inter-caste marriage said he is known at his work place for his marriage with a dominant caste Reddy woman. People respect him more than other dalit men. Another woman whose brothers got married to Brahmin women said that their family has a special status even among dalits due to the inter-caste marriages. Women in her family only married within dalits.

[5]. This is the observation from my research on Inter-caste marriages.

[6]. Ambedkar says, "In that case, the abolition of sub-castes will only help to strengthen the castes, and make them more powerful and therefore more mischievous. This remedy is therefore neither practicable nor effective, and may easily prove to be a wrong remedy." I believe the sub-caste fusion among the upper-caste lead to strengthen the power of caste system, the dalit sub-caste marriage may possibly lead to strengthen the dalit solidarity.

See Ambedkar, 1979.

[7]. A young educated woman, whose mother is a Brahmin and father a dalit, said her maternal grandmother used to abuse her by calling her caste name when she was very young.

[8]. While lower class/first generation dalit men could enter the higher educational institutes, only a middle class and second generation dalit women could come to study in these institutions. Hence, I mentioned it is a longer journey for dalit women to enter higher education.

[9]. In the manner of many of our dalit ideologues like Ilaiah and TeItumbde, I strongly disagree with the upper-caste notions of merit. But the concept of "merit" is a secular form of discrimination used against dalits. At times, dalits do fulfill the criteria of their merit, in such cases too, upper-castes's contempt towards dalits is more because the dalit is entering their arena of merit and challenging the power of upper-castes.

[10]. Sabala and Meena Gopal point out, while the upper-caste female bodies are constructed within the realm of "good woman"/ "bad woman", gendered bodies of lower castes are constructed by poverty, malnutrition and heavy burden of work. See Sabala, Gopal, 2010.

[11]. When a Dalit woman teacher (from Nagarjuna University) committed suicide after being allegedly exploited by an upper-caste colleague who promised to marry her, the dalit student groups and the father of the girl have expressed the view that her consent to such exploitation is a shame for the dalit community.

[12]. Many atrocities and sexual violence on dalit women go unreported and unrecognized whereas the Nirbhaya case caught the attention of the media. The nation-

wide uproar against Nirbhaya incident substantiates that the ideal woman figure is an upper-caste woman who is "innocent" and "pure". The actual social location of Nirbhaya is not the point of discussion but the projection of her identity by media has shaped such ideals.

See Sowjanya, 2013.

[13]. Sexual exploitation is not sexual freedom. Sexual freedom is all about the woman's choice, not about lack of choice. Hence, if dalit women are raped, molested or sexually accessed by upper-caste men and it cannot be considered as her choice, in fact it is clear case of lack of choice.

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