



PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF INTER-CASTE MARRIED COUPLES IN KARNATAKA: A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT:

Inter-caste marriages in India, particularly in Karnataka, continue to face significant social, economic, and institutional challenges despite legal frameworks promoting gender and caste equality. This research paper explores the multifaceted difficulties experienced by inter-caste couples in Karnataka, focusing on familial opposition, social alienation, economic marginalization, and institutional inertia. Drawing upon sociological theories, qualitative interviews, and official data, the study investigates the complex interplay of caste, tradition, and modernity in shaping marital dynamics. The findings reveal persistent societal resistance rooted in endogamous norms, exacerbated by weak enforcement of protective legislation and inadequate support mechanisms. The paper concludes with policy recommendations aimed at enhancing legal protection, community engagement, and socio-economic integration for inter-caste couples.



KEYWORDS: *inter-caste Marriage, Karnataka, Caste Discrimination, Social Integration, Marriage Reform, Social Stigma.*

INTRODUCTION:

Inter-caste marriage, defined as a marital union between individuals belonging to different castes within the Indian caste hierarchy, represents both a personal choice and a socio-political act of dissent against age-old endogamous norms. Constitutional provisions and statutory laws in India support inter-caste alliances as instruments of social integration and equality (Constitution of India, 1950), such unions remain fraught with challenges, especially in states like Karnataka, where caste consciousness remains deeply entrenched.

Karnataka is characterized by a complex caste structure dominated by numerically and politically influential groups such as the Lingayats, Vokkaligas, and Scheduled Castes (SCs). Despite progress in education, urbanization, and legal modernization, caste continues to influence social behaviour, particularly in matters of marriage. It is essential to investigate the specific problems and challenges faced by inter-caste married couples in Karnataka, analysing the socio-cultural, economic, legal, and psychological dimensions of their lived experiences. The primary objective is to understand the enduring resistance to inter-caste marriages and to assess the efficacy of current policy responses in

mitigating associated risks. The study adopts a qualitative and sociological approach, utilizing interviews, case studies, and secondary data from governmental and non-governmental sources to present a comprehensive overview.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

This study is grounded in three interconnected theoretical perspectives: structural-functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

From a **structural-functional** perspective, caste serves as a mechanism of social order, regulating marriage, occupation, and social interaction (Durkheim, 1893). Inter-caste marriage disrupts this equilibrium, challenging norms that reinforce social cohesion, thus provoking anxiety and resistance.

Conflict theory, as articulated by Marx and later adapted to caste by scholars like B.R. Ambedkar (1936), views caste as a system of domination perpetuated by dominant castes to maintain social and economic privilege. Inter-caste marriage, in this context, is an act of resistance that threatens power hierarchies, often leading to punitive measures such as disinheritance or violence.

Finally, **symbolic interactionism** (Blumer, 1969) allows us to explore how individuals interpret and negotiate stigma, familial expectations, and community reactions in their daily lives. This lens is particularly useful in understanding the emotional and psychological toll on inter-caste couples. These frameworks collectively help unpack the multidimensional challenges faced by inter-caste couples in Karnataka.

Prevalence and Social Context of Inter-Caste Marriage in Karnataka

According to the 2011 Census, approximately 5.8% of marriages in Karnataka were inter-caste (Registrar General of India, 2011), a figure lower than the national average of approximately 7%. However, more recent studies suggest that this number may be underreported due to social stigma and privacy concerns.

Sociologically, Karnataka's caste system is stratified into three broad categories: Forward Castes (FCs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/STs). Marriages between these categories—especially those involving SC/ST individuals and dominant castes—are particularly vulnerable to social backlash. For instance, a union between a Vokkaliga (a dominant OBC group) and a Dalit woman may trigger severe retaliation, including social boycotts or violence. Urban centers such as Bengaluru and Mysuru show higher rates of inter-caste marriages, attributed to higher education levels, exposure to liberal values, and professional mobility. However, even in urban areas, couples often conceal their marital status or migration patterns to avoid stigma (Srivastava, 2018).

KEY CHALLENGES FACED BY INTER-CASTE COUPLES:

1. Familial Opposition and Disinheritance:

One of the most immediate consequences of inter-caste marriage is familial rejection. Families often view such marriages as a threat to lineage purity, honour, and economic alliances. A common response is emotional disengagement, disinheritance, or outright expulsion.

A 2020 study by the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Bengaluru documented that 67% of inter-caste couples experienced familial estrangement post-marriage. In several cases, parents cancelled marriages or withheld financial support for children's education (CDS, 2020). In extreme cases, familial opposition escalates to honor-based violence. For example, in 2019, a Dalit man in Mandya district was attacked by his wife's upper-caste family, allegedly for "dishonoring the caste" (The Hindu, 2019). Although the couple survived, they remained in police protection for over six months.

2. Social Alienation and Community Pressure:

Beyond the family, inter-caste couples frequently face social boycotts from extended kin, neighbors, and village councils (panchayats). The All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA,

2021) reported that 45% of inter-caste couples in rural Karnataka faced exclusion from community events, religious rituals, and cooperative institutions.

This marginalization is especially acute in agrarian communities where caste determines access to land, credit, and labour. A case in Koppal district revealed that a Lingayat-Dalit couple was barred from drawing water from a community well—a practice enabled by informal caste panchayats (Daily News & Analysis, 2022). Such structural exclusion reinforces economic vulnerability and isolates couples from local support systems.

3. Economic Marginalization and Livelihood Constraints

Economic consequences are often intertwined with social exclusion. Many inter-caste couples lose access to family-owned land, businesses, or employment networks. In rural Karnataka, where caste influences agrarian labour recruitment, couples from mixed castes may find it difficult to secure work.

A village-level survey in Tumakuru district (n = 120) found that 52% of inter-caste couples reported a decline in household income within the first year of marriage (Karnataka State Commission for Women, 2021). This is particularly severe when one partner belongs to a Scheduled Caste, as discriminatory practices in informal labor markets persist. Further, dowry-related tensions often intensify in inter-caste marriages. In many cases, upper-caste families demand higher dowries to “compensate” for perceived status loss, despite the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961). A 2017 case in Davangere involved a Brahmin woman married to a Jain man; her family demanded a luxury car as dowry, leading to domestic violence and eventual separation (Indian Express, 2017).

4. Legal and Institutional Challenges:

Although the Special Marriage Act (1954) provides a legal framework for inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, its implementation is fraught with procedural and political hurdles. Couples are required to publish their intention to marry in public registers for 30 days—providing ample time for family or caste groups to instigate legal or extralegal opposition. Despite the Karnataka government’s inter-caste marriage financial incentive scheme (₹5 lakh for SC/ST couples married inter-caste), access remains limited. A report by the Karnataka State Legal Services Authority (KSLSA, 2023) revealed that less than 20% of eligible couples successfully claimed the benefit due to bureaucratic delays, lack of awareness, or fear of exposure.

Despite the Karnataka Protection of Right to Freedom of Inter-Caste Marriage Act (2021)—passed in response to rising honor killings—the law remains poorly enforced. No convictions have been reported under the Act as of 2023 (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

5. Psychological and Emotional Stress:

The cumulative effect of familial estrangement, social stigma, and economic hardship often leads to significant psychological distress. Research conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS, 2020) in Bengaluru found that 58% of inter-caste spouses exhibited symptoms of anxiety and depression, compared to 24% in caste-endogamous marriages. Children born into inter-caste families also face identity confusion and peer discrimination in schools. A study in Mysuru schools revealed that children from mixed-caste families were more likely to be bullied based on their surname or skin color (Kumar & Reddy, 2019).

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

To address the challenges faced by inter-caste couples in Karnataka, the following measures are recommended:

1. Legal Reforms and Institutional Strengthening:

- ❖ Establish dedicated inter-caste marriage protection units within district police departments.
- ❖ Amend the Special Marriage Act to remove the 30-day public notice requirement or replace it with confidential registration.

- ❖ Train judges and magistrates on anti-caste jurisprudence and gender sensitivity.
- 2. Social and Community Interventions:**
 - Launch public awareness campaigns in rural and urban areas promoting inter-caste harmony.
 - Engage community leaders, religious figures, and youth groups in dialogue initiatives.
 - Support civil society organizations that provide counseling and legal aid.
- 3. Economic and Educational Support:**
 - ✓ Integrate inter-caste couples into state self-help groups and microfinance schemes.
 - ✓ Provide housing subsidies and educational grants for children of inter-caste families.
 - ✓ Simplify documentation and disbursal processes for financial incentives under state schemes.
- 4. Data Collection and Monitoring:**
 - ❖ Develop a centralized database of inter-caste marriages and reported incidents of violence.
 - ❖ Conduct periodic impact assessments of welfare schemes.
 - ❖ Encourage academic research on caste and marriage dynamics.

CONCLUSION:

Inter-caste marriages in Karnataka embody the tension between modern democratic ideals and traditional caste hierarchies. While legal frameworks and urbanization have enabled greater personal freedom, deep-rooted caste prejudices continue to isolate and endanger inter-caste couples. The challenges they face—ranging from familial disapproval and economic marginalization to systemic legal inaction—are symptomatic of broader structural inequities.

Addressing these issues requires a multi-pronged strategy combining legal enforcement, economic empowerment, and social transformation. Only through sustained institutional commitment and community engagement can Karnataka realize the constitutional promise of equality and fraternity. Inter-caste marriage must not be seen merely as a personal decision but as a critical pathway toward social integration and the dismantling of caste-based discrimination.

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