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Rising divorce rates, new tech options renew interest in same caste unions

Families in India, abroad turn to matrimonial portals in the hope that the community will thrive when children marry within the fold

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Mumbai: For six decades, like beacons of hope, Bollywood movies have woven diaphanous dreams of a love so powerful that it knows no class, caste or religion. Again and again, in countless songs, beautiful looking actors and actresses have urged young lovers to overthrow all shackles of social norms and rules.



CASTE 2.0

“But real life is not like that,” said Ketna Shukla, aunt of Tripti Mishra, a Brahmin girl from Uttar Pradesh, who is searching for her life partner on a matrimonial website. “Real life is about who you will wake up with every day and whether you will be entitled to a life whose rules, regulations and duties are familiar to you...giving a daughter in marriage is not easy. Girls have to adjust to too many things already. Tripti says she doesn’t have anyone in mind and has left the decision to us. If she had found someone, then it would be different. But if we are going to look, we will want to make it easy for her. Marrying within the caste will make it a little bit easy.”

Hers is not a lone voice to argue that love, when nurtured in familiarity, has a better chance of surviving. No studies have been done to prove this theory, but it has many takers.

On Shaadi.com, a matrimonial website, about 83% of profiles have listed their caste details and when the sub-caste option was activated a few months ago, “more than 40% edited their profiles to specify their sub-caste as well”, said Valini D’souza, manager of corporate communications for Shaadi.com portal.

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Murugavel Janakiraman, founder of BharatMatrimony.com, an online matrimonial forum that has at least two million profiles and special interfaces that offer caste-based selection to 451 communities, explained that many factors have conspired for a revival of interest in caste-based marriages: the rising number of divorces, the challenges of modern living, the impatience with differences and unwillingness to change, and the tools

of technology—telephones, the Internet, jets and faxes—that expand choices and allow members to look for spouses within their communities.



Step by step: Communities use different ways to help young people choose their spouses from the same caste such as this matrimonial gathering for Mudaliars.

And people are willing to use every technological option to ensure the “right marriage” for their children.

For instance, when Shobha Mehta’s son reached a “marriageable age” in New York and asked her to find him a spouse, she sent word to her relatives and friends in the old city of Jaipur, in Mumbai and Delhi. For four months, she looked at “biodatas” of young girls of her community on Shaadi.com, BharatMatrimony.com, exchanged emails, juggled time zones and conversed with the parents over the

phone before flying out to meet the “short-listed” candidates. She never looked at profiles outside her community.

And when she saw Shital, a shy, soft-spoken 19-year-old, she knew the search had ended. “She had a gentleness to her. I just knew this was it,” said Mehta, fully aware that she had used every tool of modern technology to find a match for her son in the oldest form of marriage. “The children are happy. It is good that the Internet helped bring them together. How does it matter how they came together, as long as they stay married?” she asked.

It is this unsubstantiated fear—that divorce rates are rising because of inter-caste marriages—that has led to a renewed interest in caste marriages, said Janakiraman.

“It may or may not be true. But I don’t want to take a chance,” said Balraj Oberoi, a 26-year-old Hindu Khatri from Hoshiarpur, who teaches mechanical engineering for a living and is clear that he wants to marry another Khatri. He refused to disclose the name of his college, but said: “If I fall in love with someone, it’s different. But if I don’t find someone like that, then I want to make sure that cultural compatibility is there. After all, we want to live a peaceful life. If the person comes from the same caste, you can take many things for granted—lifestyle, culture, rituals, and customs—everything is the same. Half the problems are solved. There are no nasty surprises later.”

Such as the one Pari, a Vaishnav Vania received when she married a Punjabi man. “They had been dating each other for six years, when they decided to tell their families,” said Urvee Majmudar, a 25-year-old first cousin of Pari, who is now looking for her own spouse on Shaadi.com. “Both families agreed to the match and they got married. After that, all the torture began. They are asking her to bring gold, jewellery, cars, electronics and all sorts of things. They don’t feed her either—sometimes she comes to our home at night (on her way to her job at a business process outsourcing firm) and

eats with us. This is in an educated family, in Mumbai, behaving like this. It makes me want to cry. But seeing her, I have learnt my lesson. I am not seeing anyone, but even if I was, I would not marry outside my caste. I just don't want to risk being miserable in a strange way of living..."

Like her, young women, in India and abroad, say they are acutely aware of the challenges of a social structure that is intensely patriarchal, that already expects them to play many roles while juggling careers, and that they simply do not want to make marriage any more challenging than it needs to be. "Already, I am struggling with Indian and American identities. There are different social expectations from me inside my family and outside. Why on earth would I make it even more complicated," asked 27-year-old Ashima Agrawal, a computer engineer in Dallas, who says it would be nice to find an Agrawal man in the US. "Then maybe we could relate to each other better, I think. Isn't it?"

This doubt gnaws at many second-generation immigrants, who struggle at the time of marriage when they have to choose between identities: marry a foreigner and drift away from the culture they came from or marry an Indian chosen by their parents (mostly from the same community) and become bound, ever more closely to their parents and their way of life.

And to help these young people, caste-based organizations in the US, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Europe have "youth chapters" that organizes galas, dances, dinners, picnics and parties, places where young men and women of the same caste intermingle. "No one really talks about it like that, but of course we hope it will lead to marriages," said Harish Dhayal, chairman of the Association of Jats of America.

Others, such as the Mahers, a warrior caste from southern Gujarat, have set up a worldwide matrimonial portal for their community.

"From conversations in forums online, I noticed that young people lead very busy lives and they don't have the time to meet like-minded people in a traditional way. So, I decided to add a matrimonial option to the Maheronline website," said Ram Odedra, a UK-based engineer, who had created the website as a university project. The website has around 4,000 profiles of Mahers, all of them looking to marry another Maher. His website also helpfully details the "who can marry whom" rules of the community, to ensure that Mahers do not inadvertently marry the wrong Maher sub-caste.

There are many other communities like the Mahers —some set up community portals online, some print magazines, some print newspapers, some print directories and databases—and each word is a black thread stitching together a community diaspora, here and there, in India and the world. Candidly, community leaders admit that behind all the work is a hope, the hope that the community will live when children marry within its folds.

This is the fourth of a five-part series on the changing role of caste in a globalized India.

Next: A guide to the contemporary meanings of caste

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