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Silent revolution: Rise in marriages of others to dalits

Subodh Ghildiyal & Swati Mathur, TNN, Jan 31, 2010, 12.56am IST

NEW DELHI: The figures may be more impressive than they appear at first glance going by the depth of the caste divide. India saw 4,750 inter-caste marriages involving dalits in 2008-09, the number being marginally lower at 4,205 in 2007-08. In 2006-07, this stood at 3,945.

Though absolute figures for 2010 are awaited, the estimates from states have put it at 5,862, showing that the upward trend has not slackened. These are no mean numbers, given how entrenched caste prejudice is in society where marriage still remains a largely insulated institution.

Experts may caution against premature celebrations and counsel deeper investigation. But the numbers point to a trend that is not just holding but also perhaps gathering momentum. Even the fact that the couples in these alliances have stepped forward to document their marriages speaks of the cast-iron social compartments loosening. After all, it was Bhimrao Ambedkar who advocated "intermixing of blood" as a way to reduced caste animosity.

The devil, however, may be in detail. Vivek Kumar, sociologist in JNU who tracks dalit trends, says, "The numbers are impressive for sure. But you have to scratch the surface to see how many such ties are between OBCs and SCs. Also, in SC-upper caste marriages, how many are women from upper castes."

The touch of caution seems in place. According to data, traditionally rigid societies are still holding out, while those with reform movements appear to have embraced the change.

The social justice ministry of Mukul Wasnik gives an incentive of Rs 50,000 to each such couple. The tally, however, only registers those who come forward to claim the incentive. Hopefully there are more.

Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra lead the chart, registering around 1,000 for three years. In 2010, Maharashtra promises to double its figures to 2,214.

Kerala and Karnataka have also registered good absolute numbers at 996 and 600, respectively, in 2009 and promise to repeat the show. Haryana, for all its `khap panchayats' and honour killings, seems to do well with 94 marriages in 2009, 129 in 2008 and an estimated 80 in 2010. The same applies to MP with 199 in 2009, 117 in 2008 and 95 in 2007.

In sharp contrast, Gujarat, Uttarakhand, Punjab and West Bengal seem unaffected by the winds of change.

While holding out hope for a casteless future, the data also underlines a frozen social reality. Experts say Gujarat and Uttarakhand are known to be strong hierarchical societies and absence of marriages between SCs and non-SCs may reflect a political attitude.

Pradeep Tamta, MP from Almora reserved seat in Uttarakhand, said, "Even if there are mixed marriages, government does not want to be seen as incentivising or promoting them. It is politically fraught."

This may be true for Gujarat too. Experts say it is impossible that mixed marriages don't happen. "Maybe, people are scared of the publicity for fear of a caste backlash," said Vivek Kumar.

Importantly, the high rate of inter-caste marriages in South may still not include upper castes as part of this change. The 1911 caste census of Madras Presidency put upper castes at 2%, which may mean that most marriages are among OBCs (largely Most Backwards) and SCs.

Real `castelessness' is still a long way off. Experts say that "hypergamy" (male from Dwija castes) has religious sanction while "hypogamy" (woman from upper caste) would mean the real breaking away from stratification.

Bengal, on the other hand, is the unknown entity vis-a-vis inter-caste tieups. The communist system, with no belief in caste, records no figures. But this bit of progressive culture could be hiding a disturbingly static society.

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