



THE MODERNISATION OF TRADITION: GLOBALISATION AND THE STRATEGIC RECONFIGURATION OF CASTE ENDOGAMY IN RURAL-DOMINANT INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Marriage has historically functioned as the principal mechanism for preserving caste boundaries in India through strict endogamy. With globalisation characterised by economic liberalisation, urbanisation, migration, educational expansion, and digital connectivity, traditional social structures have transformed. This paper examines whether globalisation reduces, reshapes, or reinforces caste boundaries in the institution of marriage, with a special focus on Bihar, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh in comparison to West Bengal. Drawing on sociological theory and secondary literature, the study argues that globalisation has not significantly weakened caste endogamy in rural-dominant agrarian states. Instead, caste boundaries have been technologically mediated and strategically reorganised. Transformation remains uneven, more visible among urban and educated populations, yet limited in rural and politically mobilised caste contexts.

KEYWORDS : Globalisation, Caste Endogamy, Inter-Caste Marriage, Agrarian Hierarchy, Rural Dominance, North India.

INTRODUCTION

Caste endogamy remains the central mechanism through which caste reproduces itself in India. As Ambedkar (1916/2014) argued in *Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*, caste survives primarily through the regulation of marriage. Endogamy ensures the maintenance of social boundaries and the reproduction of hierarchy across generations. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and decades of modernisation, marriage continues to operate as a key site of caste preservation. Since the 1991 economic liberalisation reforms, India has undergone rapid globalisation marked by urbanisation, migration, digitisation, market expansion, and higher educational access. Modernisation theory predicts that industrialisation weakens ascriptive identities and strengthens achievement-based status systems (Lerner, 1958). However, empirical evidence suggests that caste-based endogamy remains dominant, particularly in northern states (Desai & Dubey, 2012).

This study examines Bihar, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh states, characterised by strong agrarian hierarchies and caste-based political mobilisation—compared with West Bengal, where land reforms altered rural power relations (Bardhan, 2011).

Literature Review

Sociological inquiry into the caste system began with Ambedkar's (1916/2014) assertion that endogamy is the "only characteristic of Caste." Recent research indicates that while the ritualistic aspects of caste, such as purity and pollution, may be weakening in public spaces, the "relational" aspect, specifically marriage, remains extremely rigid. In this regard, it can be noted that Srinivas (1962) identified "dominant castes" as those possessing land ownership, numerical strength, and political power; examples of this include the Jats, Yadavs, and Bhumihars of North India. These groups utilise the practice of endogamy to ensure that land ownership remains unfragmented. (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996) argue that in rural Uttar Pradesh, marriage is a process of "social placement" where the family's honour (izzat) depends on the caste purity of the bride.

As a result, one can highlight a major flaw in early modernisation theory, which predicted that education and urban employment would render caste irrelevant. Instead, contemporary literature suggests a "Caste-Class Synthesis." Upadhy (2007) notes that for the new middle class, caste has now become a "cultural resource" that facilitates mutual trust in the realms of business and social networking. Furthermore, Fuller and Narasimhan (2014) observed that India's urban high-tech professionals are not abandoning the caste system; rather, they are using it as a "filter" to maintain lifestyle compatibility, seeking partners with equivalent educational qualifications from within their own caste. This suggests that there remain such significant gaps in the urban education system that their lifestyle has not fundamentally shifted; in such a context, expecting a transformation in the marital lives of the lower strata or a global shift in marital practices remains a far-fetched hope.

Objectives of the Study:

The primary objective is to examine whether globalisation has reduced or reshaped caste boundaries in the marriage institution in Bihar,

Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh. Compared to West Bengal. To evaluate the impact of economic liberalisation and urbanisation on the frequency and social acceptance of inter-caste marriages (Desai & Dubey, 2012). To examine the role of agrarian hierarchies and land ownership in Bihar, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh in sustaining endogamous marital practices (Chowdhry, 2007). To analyse the "technological mediation" of caste, specifically how digital matrimonial platforms have updated rather than dismantled caste-based partner selection (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2014). To compare regional variations in marital flexibility, contrasting the "Green Revolution" states (Haryana/UP) and "Mandir-Mandal" states (Bihar) with the post-land-reform context of West Bengal (Kohli, 1987).

Methodology of the Study:

This study employs a qualitative, comparative, and mixed-method approach, utilising secondary empirical data and sociological meta-analysis. Research Design is a comparative regional analysis focusing on Bihar, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. Data Sources are the analysis of the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) and National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) to establish baseline figures for inter-caste marriage rates. The study synthesises Ambedkar's theory of endogamy, M.N. Srinivas's (1962) concept of the "Dominant Caste," and Bourdieu's (1977) theory of social Capital. This study employs a qualitative, comparative, and mixed-method approach, utilising secondary empirical data and sociological meta-analysis.

Analysis of the Case of West Bengal:

West Bengal serves as a "comparative exception." Kohli (1987) argues that the Left Front's land reforms (Operation Barga) successfully weakened the traditional landlord-tenant hierarchy. By decoupling land ownership from hereditary caste status, the state facilitated a social environment where agrarian caste dominance was replaced by class-based political identity. This shift led to relatively higher levels of marital flexibility compared to other states. On the other hand, globalisation has led to the "Digital Update" of caste, contrary to the belief that the internet would "blind" users to caste. Digital matrimonial platforms have, however, provided sophisticated tools to reinforce it. Platforms like Shaadi.com allow users to filter potential partners by Jati (sub-caste) and Gotra (lineage), effectively digitising the traditional role of the "matchmaker" (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2014). The "Global" Jati: Diaspora communities establish transnational networks to ensure that even while living abroad, their children marry within the caste to preserve their "cultural heritage."

Rural Dominance and Agrarian Hierarchy: Rural dominance refers to a social order where economic life, political power, and social identity are rooted in agrarian relations. In such societies, caste, land, and kinship form an integrated system of stratification (Béteille, 1996). Agrarian hierarchies are structured through Land ownership, Control over labour ranking, and Political authority, also influence in village-level politics, in northern India, such as. In Bihar, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, landholding patterns historically correspond to caste stratification (Jodhka, 2012). In contrast, West Bengal experienced partial structural transformation following land reforms. In many North Indian villages, upper and dominant castes traditionally controlled large tracts of land, while lower castes and Dalit

communities often worked as agricultural labourers. Land ownership, therefore, determined not only economic power, but also social prestige and political influence. Endogamy (marriage within one's caste) ensured the preservation of land within the same caste, the prevention of property fragmentation, and the continuity of social status. Thus, caste-based marriage is not merely a religious norm; it functions as an economic strategy to consolidate and reproduce structural dominance. With these aspects, M. N. Srinivas (1962) introduced the concept of the "dominant caste," referring to a caste group possessing numerical strength, land control, and political influence. Such groups regulate marriage norms to preserve structural advantage. In Haryana, Jats function as a dominant caste; in Uttar Pradesh, Yadavs, Thakurs, and Jats dominate regionally; in Bihar, Bhumihars, Rajputs, and Yadavs hold agrarian influence (Jodhka, 2012).

Marriage as a Mechanism of Social Reproduction: Marriage functions as a central institution of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977). It enables retention of economic capital within caste networks, the circulation of social capital, and the reproduction of symbolic status. Caste endogamy ensures land remains within caste boundaries, prevents property fragmentation, and preserves lineage prestige. Ambedkar (1916/2014) emphasised that caste survives because it strictly controls women's sexuality and marital mobility. Patriarchy and caste thus intersect structurally.

Why Rural Dominance Sustains Caste Endogamy:

Rural communities operate through dense kinship networks and informal governance structures, and inter-caste marriage may trigger social sanctions. In Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, khap panchayats enforce endogamous and clan-exogamous norms (Chowdhry, 2007). Violations can result in social boycott or violence. On the other hand, in agrarian societies, family honour is closely tied to caste purity. Women's marital choices are regulated to preserve lineage status (Chowdhry, 2007). Inter-caste marriages are often framed as dishonour, or they often lose their status. In agrarian societies, land constitutes the primary economic asset. Inter-caste marriage risks transferring property across caste lines. Thus, endogamy serves as a form of economic protectionism (Béteille, 1996).

Regional Comparison:

In Bihar, caste-based political mobilisation since the 1990s, caste consciousness has strengthened (Jaffrelot, 2003). Bihar remains predominantly agrarian despite high migration. Migrants frequently return to the village for caste-arranged marriages, demonstrating that mobility does not automatically dissolve caste boundaries; on the other hand, Haryana's agricultural prosperity coexists with rigid caste regulation. Dominant caste institutions and khap councils regulate marriage norms (Chowdhry, 2007). Even with high per capita income and global exposure, endogamy remains prevalent. If we talked about Uttar Pradesh, here, caste intersects with electoral politics and agrarian dominance. Marriage alliances reinforce economic and political networks (Jaffrelot, 2003). Urbanisation in cities such as Lucknow and Noida has increased social mixing, yet inter-caste marriage remains statistically limited. Comparatively, West Bengal's land reforms under the Left Front, especially Operation Barga, redistributed tenancy rights and weakened traditional landlord dominance (Bardhan, 2011). While caste persists, agrarian caste authority declined relative to northern states, contributing to comparatively greater flexibility in marriage practices.

Regional Analysis and Data Trends: According to IHDS data, only about 5% to 11% of marriages in India are inter-caste, a figure that has remained remarkably stagnant (Desai & Dubey, 2012). Showing below in the table:

States	Primary Dominant castes	Mechanism of Control	Marital Flexibility
Hararyana	Jats	Khap panchayats/Honour codes	Very Low
Bihar	Yadavs, Bhumihar, Rajputs	Political Mobilisation land	Low
Uttar Pradesh	Jats, Yadav, Thakurs	Agrarian Hierarchy/Vote Banks	Low
West Bengal	Bhadralok (historically)	Post-Land Reform Socialisation	Moderate

Globalisation and the Transformation of Caste in Marriage:

Urban migration reduces direct village surveillance but often strengthens caste-based urban associations. Migrants rely on caste

networks for employment and housing (Desai & Dubey, 2012). Where's education promotes egalitarian values; however, marriage decisions remain family-centred. Studies show inter-caste marriage rates remain low nationally (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016), and technology has modernised but not dismantled caste endogamy. Matrimonial websites provide caste filters, enabling families to expand their search radius while maintaining caste boundaries (Titzmann, 2014). Even Government schemes also encouraging inter-caste marriage have limited success due to persistent social stigma and fear of backlash, and among overseas Indian communities, caste-based marriage preferences persist, demonstrating caste's adaptability under globalisation.

The study synthesises Ambedkar's theory of endogamy, M.N. Srinivas's (1962) concept of the "Dominant Caste," and Bourdieu's (1977) theory of social capital. Where agrarian foundations remain caste-based, change is gradual. Economic liberalisation alone does not dismantle entrenched social hierarchies. Caste demonstrates adaptive resilience. Rather than disappearing, it reorganises within new economic structures. Caste, class, and gender operate simultaneously. Patriarchal control over women's marriage choices sustains caste boundaries despite modernisation.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that globalisation interacts with agrarian hierarchies rather than replacing them. In Bihar, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, the persistence of endogamy is a strategic response to protect land, political power, and social honour. While West Bengal shows that structural land reforms can create cracks in this system, the broader Indian context remains one of "Modernised Caste," where technology and migration serve as new vehicles for old exclusions. And this comparative analysis demonstrates that globalisation has not fundamentally eroded caste endogamy in Bihar, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh. Instead, caste boundaries have been technologically mediated and strategically reinforced.

In rural-dominant agrarian states, land ownership, political mobilisation, and honour systems sustain endogamous marriage practices. Migration, education, and digital platforms modify but do not dismantle caste logic. West Bengal presents a partial exception, where land reforms weakened traditional agrarian caste dominance and contributed to relatively greater flexibility in marital norms.

Therefore, globalisation alone cannot abolish the caste system; without changes in the agrarian economic structure, caste boundaries in marriage will remain permanent, and along with that, the infrastructural aspects of society will continue to decline, such as improvement of the social system in agriculture, socialisation policies, and Cultural diversity.

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