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## Marriage murders and anti-caste feminist politics in India

Sreerekha Sathi

*International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, the Netherlands*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the complex nexus between inter-caste marriages and escalating caste politics in India. While much literature justifiably focuses on rising Islamophobia in the country, this paper considers the 'love jihad' phenomenon and extreme forms of violence against individuals in inter-caste or inter-religious marriages, particularly since 2014. The politics and practice of inter-caste choice marriages in India raise fundamental questions about the institution of marriage itself. The paper reviews relevant literature and draws on cases reported in the media to propose a deeper interpretation of the role of caste in marriage murders. It further explores several powerful critiques from the past of the institution and practice of arranged marriage in India. It concludes by highlighting the need for an anti-caste, feminist perspective in these debates, as increasing numbers of marriage murders have coincided with an exoticization of India's culture of arranged marriages and caste hierarchies globally.

### The caste of matchmaking

In July 2020, Netflix released a new television show, 'Indian Matchmaking'. Its host, a matchmaker for arranged marriages, helps her clients—who come from India and the United States—to find a suitable match. Critics of the show have raised concerns that it promotes 'divisive' practices based on caste and colourism (Ellis-Petersen, 2020). Nonetheless, the show's popularity has grown with each new season. Episodes include brief encounters with old couples in arranged marriages who have lived together for decades, showcasing the success of the practice of arranged, caste- and religion-based marriage. A powerful theme, repeated frequently throughout the show, is the importance of 'a good family', as Indian arranged marriages seek to unite 'good families'. In one aspect, however, India's arranged marriages differ from those in other countries and cultures, that is, their entanglement with the politics and practices of the caste system in the country.

Caste practices and caste violence are foundationally ingrained in India's history. Anti-caste, feminist thinkers in India reveal that caste, class, and gendered relations function as a totality within the country (Teltumbde, 2018) and abroad (Soundararajan, 2022). The rigidity of conventional caste practices and the encroachment of religious and caste practices in both the personal and political realms in India have led to

inter-caste marriages generating intense conflict and sometimes extreme forms of violence against the involved individuals, families, and communities. This trend is also impacted by the importance given to marriage as a one-time, life-changing, and immutable event in Indian and South Asian cultures. Rising incidence of 'honour killings' and purported 'love jihad' suggest a new phase in the history of caste-based violence in India. This paper uses the term 'marriage murders' to refer to any form of killing in the name of marriage, including 'honour killings', a term much criticized by feminist scholars (Dias & Proudman, 2014; Parikh, 2015; Sheikh, 2022). 'Love jihad' refers to a hate campaign targeting Muslim men seeking marriage to Hindu women (Frydenlund & Leidig, 2022). In the first decades of the 2000s, a heightened moral policing has coincided with a rise in rapes and murders of those who violate the norms of caste order, especially those who engage in inter-caste or inter-religious marriage (Chatterji, Hansen, & Jaffrelot, 2020; Tamalapakula, 2019). Based on incidents of violence and marriage murders resulting from inter-caste and inter-religious marriage<sup>1</sup> since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014, the paper reveals the intensification of the caste politics of 'Hindutva'—a Hindu nationalist political ideology that promotes creation of a Hindu nation, the hegemony of Hindus, and a way of life defined by a caste-based regime and supremacy of the upper caste Brahmins.<sup>2</sup>

E-mail address: [sree.sathi@iss.nl](mailto:sree.sathi@iss.nl).

<sup>1</sup> All inter-caste marriages are not inter-religious and vice versa. The terms inter-caste, inter-religious, and inter-caste/religious are carefully chosen throughout this paper based on relevance and the context.

<sup>2</sup> Brahmins are the highest rank in the caste hierarchies of Hinduism, considered to have access to superior knowledge. Geetha (2015, p. 8) describes Brahmanism as an ideology of power and persuasion that authorizes normative notions of social pertinence and identity within the caste order.

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I argue that violence against inter-caste and inter-religious marriages in India must be investigated from an anti-caste perspective. Caste politics are acknowledged as playing a fundamental role in violence against inter-caste and inter-religious marriages in India, calling for further research and perhaps creation of new datasets focused on caste violence in marriages. The analysis further addresses the complexities of 'traditional versus modern' binary thinking concerning marriage in India. Selected critical discourses are introduced from India's anti-caste and feminist literature, examining views on marriage held by anti-caste thinkers such as E. V. Ramaswami Naicker (popularly known as Periyar), B. R. Ambedkar, and the Phules (Savitribai Phule and Jyothirao Phule), exploring and revealing the fundamental relationship between caste politics and inter-caste marriage. The conclusion argues for a deeper understanding of India's caste politics and its attitude towards love, relationships, and marriage, and reflects on anti-caste thinking as the only progressive alternative path to end marriage murders and resist the growing caste violence in the country.

### Caste politics in contemporary India

South Asian women's movements (as well as leftist movements and political parties) have been strongly criticized and challenged for the dominant role played by upper caste and upper class women and their marginalization of Dalit<sup>3</sup> voices and issues. Divisions between Brahmanical and Dalit feminists have both challenged and strengthened these movements, raising relevant questions around caste and the space available for Dalit feminist positions (Patil, 2022; Arya & Rathore, 2020; Rege, 1998). In South Asia, caste politics has constituted an added locus for ideological battles by women's rights activists, in addition to their resistance to capitalist modernity, nationalism, and patriarchy. Under India's growing right-wing nationalist politics, women's bodies have been a battlefield in the fight for control, the protection of honour, and the vision of a 'pure' nation. Particularities of how this has played out are evident in the politics of its Hindu majority and dominant Brahmin minority. Marriages between upper caste women and lower caste men<sup>4</sup> of any religion continue to raise spectres such as 'the desire of the Other' and impure male bodies invading pure women's bodies, while any form of inter-caste marriage evoke the possibility of producing impure children. While earlier debates on the tradition of arranged marriages raised criticism against the onslaught of modernity in marriage practices, more recent discourses suggest that in India arranged marriages blend modernity and tradition (Bhandari, 2020; Choksi, 2022). Yet, both in modernity and in tradition, arranged marriages are shaped by local patriarchies and have different implications for women of different statuses in the caste order (Sangari, 1995). While much of the discussion on arranged marriages focuses on fading traditions which may be brought back and blended with modernity, these discourses also reflect a combination of forces and events, such as neoliberal capitalism, transnational migration, and the impacts of these on the family and marriage as social institutions, and point to major changes in the cultural, social, and political fabric of the country (Palriwala & Uberoi, 2008; Sreenivas, 2021). In this context, a conversation that illuminates the coexistence of India's expanding matchmaking industry—its 'big fat Indian weddings'—and the increasing number of marriage murders in the name of 'love jihad' or 'honour killing' becomes extremely relevant.

In India, inter-caste marriage is allowed under the Special Marriage Act of 1954 and the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955. While the Special Marriage Act permits inter-caste, inter-community couples in India to

marry legally without religious conversion, the Hindu Marriage Act does not mention the matching of caste as a requirement for marriage. In 2011, inter-caste marriages accounted for around 5.82 % of all marriages in India (Census of India, 2011; Ray, Roy Chaudhuri, & Sahai, 2020), though this figure was 10 % in 2005–2006 (Das, Roy, & Tripathy, 2011). To promote inter-caste marriages, in 2006, the then government under the Indian National Congress offered assistance to newly married inter-caste couples, providing them INR 50,000 (approx. US \$600) in financial aid, of which state governments were required to pay half. In 2013, a scheme for social integration through inter-caste marriages was introduced by the Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, supported by a INR 250,000 (\$3000) contribution from India's Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. However, beneficiaries of the scheme remained very low, numbering 500 or less nationally, in a country of 1.48 billion. In 2015, only 54 couples received support, though that number grew to 120 in 2019 (IIPA, n.d.). While the scheme was initially meant for couples with an annual income below INR 500,000 (\$60,000), in 2018 the BJP government scrapped the income ceiling and opened the scheme to all couples but made it mandatory for couples to submit their Aadhaar ID numbers and the details of their Aadhaar ID-linked bank account with their application. The Aadhaar identification number scheme, too, was introduced under the BJP government in 2010, and by 2015, most Indians had such a number in the form of a smart ID card with a microchip.

In 2022, the Dr. Ambedkar scheme for social integration through inter-caste marriages was merged with the Centrally Sponsored Scheme for implementation of the Protection of Civil Rights Act of 1955, and the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989. Inter-caste marriages have since been referred to as 'inter-caste marriage cases' and 'atrocities cases'. A document released by India's Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment provides new data since the merger of the two schemes under the title 'Number of atrocity victims provided Relief & No. of couples provided incentives for inter-caste marriage' (Gov of India, n.d.-d). According to the ministry's website, beneficiaries of inter-caste marriage incentives increased from 9613 in 2011–2012 to 28,543 in 2021–2022 (Gov of India, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). A circular issued in January 2023 by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment states that eligible couples may apply for the incentives only until February 2023 and that all pending 'cases', or applications, were to be resolved by March (Gov of India, 2023). Thus, while the 2018 scrapping of the scheme's ceiling was much celebrated, as demonstrating the federal government's commitment to fighting the caste system (India Today, 2018), by 2023 the very same scheme was to be discontinued. Moreover, surveys reveal that most educated Indians continue to practice caste discrimination and even indicated their support for new laws against inter-caste marriage (Thorat & Coffey, 2016).

Indeed, caste politics play an important role in marriage murders. According to the 2021 report 'Crime in India' published by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), the highest number of murders related to 'love affairs' took place in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Gujarat; after 'love affairs', the next highest number of murders was attributed to 'illicit relationships' (Crime in India, 2021, p. 165). Numbers of kidnappings and abductions related to marriage and love relationships were also very high (Crime in India, 2021, p. 188). Though these numbers are not presented as linked to inter-caste marriages or relationships, one cannot ignore the likelihood of individuals engaging in inter-caste marriages being counted as kidnapped or abducted. In the report, data on crime against lower/scheduled castes is counted under 'caste conflict' and 'casteism'. However, in the data related to murders, kidnappings, and other forms of violence related to love and marriage, the caste of the victim and whether caste conflict is the underlying cause are left unspecified.

The Modi government has passed numerous anti-religious conversion and anti-'love jihad' laws and ordinances in the past 2–3 years (2020–2023). These measures do not directly address inter-caste marriages but indirectly seek to protect caste and religious purity and prevent the birth of 'mixed children'. Such laws, which violate

<sup>3</sup> Dalit is a political term, meaning 'the oppressed'. Dalits are outside the Hindu caste structure and in the past called 'untouchables'.

<sup>4</sup> Rather than terms like upper or lower caste, 'Hindu caste' can be used to refer to those in a caste, as opposed to those outside a caste. Although I do not like to use the terms upper or lower, in the absence of a better alternative, I use it to convey the power hierarchy in the caste order.

constitutional rights related to individual privacy and choice (Chishty, 2021), have been adopted by states such as Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Himachal Pradesh (Ghanghar, 2021; Rashid, 2020) as a step towards preventing the forced conversion of Hindus to Islam (Katakam, 2021). To prevent incidents of 'love jihad' and religious conversion, the Uttar Pradesh government passed a law in November 2020 criminalizing religious conversion, making it punishable by up to ten years in jail (Ayyub, 2020). In the very first month after adoption of the law, 49 persons were jailed (Sahu, 2021). The state of Maharashtra recently adopted a resolution creating a panel to gather detailed information on inter-caste and inter-religious marriages (Mascarenhas, 2022)—data that can be misused against the individuals and families involved in such marriages. Several habeas corpus writs have been filed in courts across the country litigating choice-based marriages, in most cases by families of the persons engaged in such marriages. The courts have mostly sided with the family, thus supporting 'rescue' or recovery of the adult women involved in such a marriage or relationship, which the courts have defined as 'improper'. As such, state law is being used to prevent relationships based on choice (Baxi, 2006, p. 21).

While the Netflix show, 'Indian Matchmaking', continues to garner widespread success, any advertisement, movie, or social media post supporting inter-caste or inter-religious relationships or marriages has provoked protest in India, often leading to restrictions on the dissemination of such information. In 2020, a well-known diamond-selling brand, Tanishq, had to withdraw a new advertisement that depicted a Muslim family organizing a baby shower for their Hindu daughter-in-law. The advertisement was said to promote 'love jihad'. Tanishq had to apologize for offending Hindu sentiments, as Hindu nationalists called for a boycott of the company's products (Bhargava, 2020). In the Global North, 'big fat Indian weddings' among

the upper middle class and elite are presented as an exotic manifestation of the oriental, mysterious India. The Indian elite and others in the South Asian community are party to this exoticization; they have much in common in terms of class, caste, and religious interests. Demystifying and de-exoticizing these marriages would mean exposing their largely hidden caste politics. While arranged caste- and religion-based marriages between families are the norm in India, new technologies have made them part of the online world as well. Their reproductions extend from matrimonial columns in print media (Ramasubramanian & Jain, 2009) to dating sites that allow filtering based on both caste and religion and shows like 'Indian Matchmaking' which openly promote marriages based on caste and community. Marriages arranged in these digital spaces are interpreted as modern but maintaining tradition. The promotion of arranged marriages through an expanding industry of online agencies based on religion, caste, sub-caste, and community—such as Tamil Brahmin Matrimony and Nair Matrimony—reveals the numerous institutions involved in the practice. While some researchers see the rise of choice or love marriages in India as an influence of modernity or Western culture, a closer look suggests that these do not include inter-caste marriages. These arranged marriages joining partners in the educated upper and middle classes strictly fall within the realms of caste endogamy and are performed under family surveillance more than just partner compatibility (Bhandari, 2017, pp. 2–3). By contrast, marriages between Dalit and non-Dalit are met with hostility and punishment (Bhandari, 2017, pp. 3–6; Allendorf, 2013).

Though there is a lack of data on the caste status of the victims of marriage murders, media reports suggest that the victims both men and women, tend to belong to the lower caste or Dalit community. For the investigation in this paper, I selected media reports that made clear and direct reference to the caste angle in cases of violence or murder related to inter-caste or inter-religious relationships or marriages since the BJP came to power in 2014. An online search on inter-caste/religious marriage-related violence or murders in this period produced hundreds of results, while some cases were widely shared both in print and on social media and gained national attention while others were overlooked. To

fully understand the depth and complexity of the inter-caste angle in marriage murders, it is important to know whether the victim is a Dalit Muslim, a Dalit Christian, or a Dalit Hindu. Research and data on religious conversion, 'love jihad', and inter-caste or inter-religious relationships that specify the individuals' caste status are rare, but an investigation of media reports on marriage murders reveals a grim reality.

Kevin, a 23-year-old Dalit Christian, was murdered in Kerala for marrying an upper caste Christian woman in 2018. Chandra (39), a Dalit political activist in Uttarakhand state, was murdered in 2022 for marrying an upper caste Hindu woman. Sankar, a 22-year-old Dalit man from Tamil Nadu, was hacked to death in 2016 for marrying an upper caste Hindu woman. In 2017 in Rajasthan, Afrazul, a 45-year-old Dalit Muslim migrant labourer from Bengal, was publicly murdered and a live video of the incident shared on Facebook. Afrazul was accused of having an affair with a Hindu woman, but this was a case of mistaken identity, as it was Afrazul's Muslim friend who was in fact dating the Hindu woman (Sharma, 2020). Kamble, a Dalit man from Karnataka, was murdered in May 2022 for his relationship with a Muslim woman. Nagaraju, a 26-year-old from Hyderabad, wanted to marry a woman from an upper caste Muslim family and was prepared to convert to Islam, but he came from a Dalit family and the woman's family refused to allow her to marry him. Nagaraju was stabbed to death by the woman's family in public view (Henry, 2022). In most cases, Dalits were killed for being in a relationship with non-Dalits, with most victims having a lower middle-class background. These couples and individuals fell victim to differences in caste or class status, while others survived due to the support of the powerful in the community or access to resources.

Research on rigid caste practices and hierarchies among Muslims, and resistance to these among India's Dalit Muslims (Alam, 2009), brings to light the multi-layered caste and religious politics at the core of marriage murders involving Muslims. As Muslims experience increasing vulnerability as a minority, restrictive caste politics and caste hierarchies also expose them to the threat of marriage murders. Indeed, against the backdrop of Hindu majoritarian politics, fears and insecurities have deepened among minority and other religion communities, adding fuel to the existing caste hierarchies and caste violence.

### Understanding 'love jihad'

The extreme levels of hate and intolerance towards individuals and families engaged in inter-caste or inter-religious marriages are reflected in the powerful hate campaign called 'love jihad', which targets Muslim men and depicts them as the dangerous Other (Frydenlund & Leidig, 2022; Khatun, 2018). In the case of alleged 'love jihad' incidents (also called 'Romeo jihad', see Rao, 2011; Sarkar, 2018), Muslim men are accused of seducing and converting non-Muslim women for marriage. This, according to the campaign, threatens to undermine Hinduism and make it a minority religion in India (Strohl, 2019). Caste, religion, and the Hindutva political project find a meeting point here. The term 'love jihad' encompasses accusations not only of what is considered 'false' love, in which Hindu women are lured into relationships with Muslim men, but also of forced conversions, abduction, rape, forced marriage, and even the forced recruitment of Hindu women into Muslim terrorist organizations abroad. Muslim organizations have been accused of offering money to Muslim youths to lure, trap, marry, and covert Hindu women. Stories of such 'love jihad' organizations claim the existence of thousands of cases of 'love jihad', though with no supporting evidence provided (Gupta, 2014, 2016; Varadarajan, 2017). Hindu organizations and community groups have.

played an important role in punishing parties said to be involved, approaching their families and issuing threats, invoking the power of the state or police, and even sometimes successfully influencing the judiciary. Hindu right-wing groups have organized their women's wings to campaign against 'love jihad', forming chapters with names such as

'Women From India Against Love Jihad' to raise public awareness of the ways Muslim men try to force Hindu women to bear Muslim children or Hindu women being trafficked by Muslim men (Sarkar, 2018, p. 12). 'Love jihad' quickly morphed into an international conspiracy theory. India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) has investigated the phenomenon, but no evidence to substantiate the stories surrounding 'love jihad' has been forthcoming (Rajagopal, 2017a, 2017b; Singh, 2017).

Institutions like the NIA have investigated the connection between 'love jihad' incidents and terrorist organizations. It is unclear why Muslim men would want to convert and recruit Hindu women as terrorists, but media outlets continue to publish many such stories, both in print and in visual media. In most reports, the voices of the involved women are absent, the stories are sensationalized, and the narrative is tightly controlled. The killing of Afrazul is a telling example. Meticulously planned, a live video of the murder was recorded and shared on social media. As the video went viral, a huge number of online responses expressed solidarity with the murderer and declared that this was exactly how those accused of 'love jihad' should be dealt with. Meanwhile, wild claims have continued to circulate about the number of 'love jihad' cases. A populist Hindu organization's helpline claims to have 'rescued' 8500 girls and women from 'love jihad'. The 'Struggle for Hindu Existence' website carries endless 'titillating stories about Muslim youths luring Hindu maidens into wickedness' (The Economist, 2017). Spreading online hate has become normalized, and social media platforms are used to create and control a narrative of fear and hate (Mankekar, 2021; Punwani, 2014). More and more Indian institutions and government agencies discourage inter-caste/religious marriages of love and choice, to avoid potential trouble from Hindu religious organizations, caste-based community organizations like the Khap panchayats (Kaur, 2010), and state agencies including the police and judiciary.

Much of the debate on religious 'reconversion' by Hindu right-wing organizations is directly or indirectly aimed at inter-caste/religious marriages. Hindu right-wing organizations see such relationships as forced conversion to Islam, so reconversion back to Hinduism is central to their work. Of course, conversions centre on religion, not caste. With or without conversion, caste status and hierarchies remain. The rituals of conversion from or reconversion to Hinduism provide no space for discussion of the caste status or identity of those concerned. While religious conversion or reconversion bypasses the caste factor, in the case of marriage, caste does figure as the central issue, and caste politics are fundamental. It is important to understand whether marriage is discouraged or disallowed between Hindus and non-Hindus or more specifically between the upper and the lower castes. It is crucial to know if it is mainly about the violation of the Hindu caste order, its sacredness and humiliation, and the exposition of the fragility of upper caste Hindu masculinities by their women to 'Others' (Gupta, 2009; Gökarkınel et al.). A close reading of multiple stories of alleged 'love jihad' incidents and other inter-caste or inter-religious marriage murders reveals that while Islamophobia is an important factor, caste is central.

The Hindu right-wing version of 'love jihad' incidence points to large numbers of Hindu Dalit women as victims of 'love jihad' (Banerjee, 2021). Interestingly, though Hindu nationalists rarely acknowledge caste hierarchies and the subordination of the lower caste or Dalit communities in Hinduism, when it comes to 'love jihad', the loss of Dalit or Adivasi<sup>5</sup> women to Muslim men in marriage is lamented as the loss of valued Hindu women. Caste specifications and the status of lower caste women in the caste hierarchy do not seem to be a matter of concern in this context. While conversations on India's caste system and caste practices raise extreme discomfort among the Hindu right wing, a broad Hindu alliance has been mobilized to encourage men and women from lower caste and class backgrounds, whether Dalit or Adivasi, to support the Hindu nationalist agenda.

## Khap panchayats and the new 'Ghar Vapasi'

Khap panchayats are caste-based, patriarchal community organizations that deem marriages legitimate or illegitimate according to whether they follow or defy caste- and community-based marriage practices. They are most active and powerful in the northern part of India among communities which are also known for practicing sex-selective abortions, leading to an adverse sex ratio, and discrimination against girl children. When a marriage, endogamous or exogamous, in the community goes against the caste order or the wishes of the families and community members, Khap panchayats, as self-proclaimed tribunals, issue diktats which often lead to 'honour killings' (Kaur, 2010; Yadav, 2009).

The role of Khap panchayats reveals the complexity of marriage murders as a combination of caste hierarchies and local patriarchies within each caste, community, and religion. Marriage murders take place under the directives of the Khap panchayats in local communities (Bharadwaj, 2012). Khap panchayats enforce the caste order in the community and at times promote extremely violent measures against those who break the caste hierarchy. In 2018, the Supreme Court of India declared Khap panchayats illegal in the context of their interference in marriages between two consenting adults. However, as community organizations composed of experienced and resourceful members, they continue to issue rulings and to exert pressure on families and state agencies, such as the police and judiciary, to follow them. Counting them as part of the Hindu tradition, the present government openly supports them. While Khap panchayats and 'love jihad' campaigners have different historical and political trajectories, both reflect the power of caste hierarchies and actively seek to end inter-caste and inter-religious marriages.

The Adivasi and Dalit communities are classed as outside and inferior in the Hindu caste order. The relationship between the two communities and Hindu right-wing groups has nonetheless grown progressively more complex in recent decades, impacted by both caste and class. Members of lower caste communities have converted to other religions mainly to escape caste practices, but even after conversion their conditions seldom improve; they are merely labelled Dalit Christians or Dalit Muslims. Since the BJP came to power in 2014, and in response to an alleged increase in incidents of 'love jihad', Hindu organizations have initiated a campaign called 'Ghar Vapasi' (returning home) to bring converted Hindus back to Hinduism. The fact that most lower caste communities remain subordinate economically and socially after conversion to other religions is used as an argument for reconversion practices—to expand the Hindu fold, the objective of the Hindutva political project (Outlook Web Desk, 2022). The long and convoluted relationship between the Hindu right wing and the Dalit community includes multiple efforts—economic, political, and electoral—to gather support from the Dalit and Adivasi communities for the broader Hindu alliance (Bremán & Ghanshyam, 2022).

India's marriage murders have grown in complexity as more lower caste and indigenous community members support the Hindu right wing. Their loyalty may be rewarded with offers of power, positions, and material benefits, thanks to growing financial support from within India and the diaspora (Bremán & Ghanshyam, 2022). The broader right-wing political alliance has been increasingly successful in attracting members from the Dalit, Adivasi, and even other minority communities, such as Muslims and Christians. Reconverted Adivasi and Dalit have played a role in anti-Muslim pogroms, backed by Hindu right-wing groups.

## Women in support of marriage murders

Extremist nationalist politics and the resulting violence are tied to hegemonic, toxic masculinity and patriarchal relations. It is thus important to look deeper into gender politics, to examine how caste and gender support nationalist politics in India. While the Hindutva political project is the leading force behind the new laws prohibiting conversion

<sup>5</sup> 'Adivasi' is a political term referring to the India's indigenous population.



from Hinduism, these laws impact women and men differently. Within Hinduism, the impact of these laws and institutions such as Khap panchayats varies depending on an individual's caste and class status. From a feminist and gender perspective, it is interesting to note that many upper and middle caste Hindu women support this political project and even play an important role in reproducing caste through it.

Like extremist nationalist groups elsewhere, Hindu nationalist groups in India believe in purity of blood. They consider the mixing of blood through marriage and breeding a serious threat to the identity and culture of the Hindu nation. Fear of being 'invaded' and undercut by impure, inferior castes, races, and religions has served as an important tool to bring together India's dominant Hindu majority—much like the debates around miscegenation among white supremacists in the West. This worldview propagates fear that Hindus will soon become a minority in the country and focuses on alleged victimhood, violence, and marginalization of Hindus in India and around the world (Frydenlund & Leidig, 2022; Gökanksel, Neubert, & Smith, 2019; Sreenivas, 2021).

For decades, India's Hindu nationalists have actively worked on a new, globally marketable version of Hinduism, reshaping its ideology (Ahmad, 1993). They have unsuccessfully tried to portray that caste relates only to an occupational division, to achieve order in society, and that it is different from race (Banaji, 2018). Dreams of a mythical past are invoked, combined with sentiments of victimhood, anti-intellectualism, and sexual anxiety, to propagate a political climate in which nationalist right-wing assertions can thrive (Stanley, 2018, p. 127). As increasing numbers of Indian women have joined the paid workforce, changes in the gender division of labour within the family and the threat these changes might imply for local patriarchies have fuelled a sexual and economic anxiety, a growing insecurity, and a paranoia among certain men (Stanley, 2018, pp. 131, 135).

Such sentiment however is not new. Since the 1920s, literature published by Hindu right-wing organizations has referred to Hindu women falling prey to Muslim men who 'lure them into love' and then convert them to Islam. In 1936, the women's wing of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Rashtra Sevika Samiti, was formed. By the 1990s, the Samiti had an estimated one million women as members (Bacchetta, 1996, p. 133). Although men remained in control of the leadership of the RSS, women were accepted as leaders of the women's wing and public campaigns where deemed appropriate. Beyond this, women members' training focused on equipping them to become good mothers and wives and to protect themselves from the 'invasion' and 'treachery' of non-Hindu men (Sethi, 2002). Nationalism and the worship of women as mothers have thus formed the cornerstones of women's active and passive roles within these organizations.

The organizing of women through the RSS started by encouraging members' wives to become active and continued by including younger women from the community in the membership base. Young Hindu women, especially those from upper and middle castes, were encouraged to join RSS training centres (shakhas), leading to a rapid increase in numbers of RSS-operated shakhas and non-governmental schools (Sarkar, 2018). In the 1990s, thousands of Hindu right-wing activists, including women, rose to positions of power (Chhibber & Misra, 1993), and many of these women have since actively participated in attacks on minorities.

The 2002 Gujarat pogrom represented another step towards women's incorporation in the Hindu right wing, as women played a part in the violence (George & Kannabiran, 2007; Sarkar, 2002). In the name of women's empowerment in relation to Hindu nationalism, organizations like Rashtra Sevika Samiti have been successful in encouraging women towards violent activism (Kovacs, 2004). The active participation of women in Hindu nationalist politics and community organizations has helped to impose compliance within the Hindu religious order.

### Anti-caste thought and inter-caste marriage

In the 19th century, anti-caste movements saw marriage as an

important site for transformation. This produced a powerful anti-caste literature, social reformers, scholars, and debates engaging with caste hierarchy and violence and offering interesting proposals on how to resist. Some of them proposed a reconceptualization of marriage in the Indian context to confront caste practices and hierarchies. Savitribai Phule (1831–1897) and her partner Jyothirao Phule (1827–1890), Dalit thinkers and social reformers, founded Satyashodhak Samaj (the Truth Seeker's Society) in 1873. The organization, established in Pune, Maharashtra, sought to promote social and political rights of the Dalit community and end the practice of inviting Brahmins to rituals like marriages and funerals. It encouraged women, especially non-Brahmins, to engage in a new form of marriage ceremony, which excluded Brahmin priests. These were known as 'Satyashodhak marriages'. Since arranged marriages were—and remain to this day—conducted and blessed by Brahmin priests, the new ritual was seen as bold. Satyashodhak marriages challenged the Brahmin's sacerdotal power and ritually 'pure' status in performing marriage rituals and instead experimented with a more egalitarian form of marriage. Some members of the anti-caste and Dalit movements still practice Satyashodhak marriage today (Harad, 2021).

Ambedkar (1891–1956), one of India's best-known anti-caste thinkers, argued that no change or reform could occur in the Hindu social order without the abolition of castes and sub-castes. He spoke of the impossibility of conversion to Hinduism, given its foundational caste politics. He stressed casteism in food consumption and marriage as two of the most important aspects of change, suggesting inter-dining and inter-caste marriages as the solution (Ambedkar, 1936). For him, '[T]he real remedy [for breaking caste] is inter-caste marriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount the separatist feeling—the feeling of being aliens—created by Caste will not vanish' (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 99). Ambedkar believed that such relationships would facilitate better understanding of a Dalit ideology (Srilata, 2001) promoting inter-caste marriages, which in turn could oppose the caste endogamy widely practiced in India.

It is unclear whether the Dalit community itself encourages inter-caste marriages. Experiences around local patriarchies and power hierarchies, especially when Dalit women marry men from upper castes, are complex and hard to navigate. Undoing caste thus requires a deeper dissociation from caste ideology at multiple locations and levels (Tamalapakula, 2019, p. 322). It is important, too, to identify differences between the experiences of Dalit men marrying upper caste women and those of Dalit women marrying upper caste men and understand whether these experiences allow inter-caste marriage to weaken caste ideology and politics.

In 1925, the anti-caste thinker Periyar (1879–1973) founded the Dravidian movement and Self-Respect Movement (SRM) in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. The aim was to initiate radical anti-Brahmin and anti-caste practices by proposed 'self-respect marriages' based on agreements or contracts. As a result, marriage practices in southern India came to include inter-caste marriage and widow remarriage, which challenged the subordination of women and the doctrine of compulsory chastity and purity. Self-respect marriages, legalized in Tamil Nadu in 1968 (Subramani, 2015), desacralized and redefined marriage as a contract for living together and also secured women's right to property (Geetha, 1998, p. 9). Periyar advocated the abolishment of God, religion, and caste to expunge the relevance of the Hindu sacred texts (the Shastras), Brahmanical supremacy and hegemony and the nationalism based on these elements. He believed that SRM would provide those oppressed under Hinduism a chance for equality. By advocating renunciation of caste and religion, Periyar endorsed not only relinquishment of the associated privileges, but also a remaking of masculine and feminine subjectivities on the basis of mutuality and freedom.

Periyar's writings include long discussions on the politics of marriage and its control over women, condemning them to a form of servitude

similar to Brahmins forcing lower castes into servitude. His writings on marriage are radical. For Periyar, the practices of private property, caste, and sexuality are elements of the same oppressive structure. Women are said to need a space outside of marriage for self-validation—to take on lovers, choose a life of economic self-sufficiency, and reject the responsibilities of motherhood if they so choose. Self-respect marriages were premised on revocability, with freedom to part inscribed into the marriage ideal; no guarantees could be given or taken except those to which the couple voluntarily agreed (Geetha, 2015, p. 15). SRM believed that the Hindu understanding and practice of marriage and relationship, based on exclusivity, purity, and pollution, served the material interests of the Brahmins and other upper castes. Since SRM saw women as equal subjects with equal right to property and power inside and outside the household, women did not have to consider themselves as mere adjuncts of men and bearers of their seed (Geetha, 1999, p. 227). Periyar believed that Brahmanism and caste politics not only disrespected the working class, but also divided women, forcing them into the servitude of marriage.

The idea of self-respect marriages challenged caste politics and its practices in Hinduism and in other religions too which borrowed the practice, but it was not easy for the SRM to grow and triumph against these powerful religions with such massive support. Though it attracted people from non-Brahmin communities, especially women, SRM faced resistance from upper caste Hindus (Srilata, 2001). In time, self-respect marriages became detached from their original context and meaning, though they have remained an influential alternative form of marriage (Geetha, 1998). Despite attempts to declare self-respect marriages legally invalid, the practice continues to this day. In 2015, the Madras High Court, responding to a public interest complaint, ruled that self-respect marriages cannot be declared illegal (Subramani, 2015). Nonetheless, in a recent judgment, the court denied marriage registration to an inter-religious couple, emphatically declaring that self-respect marriages can only bind two Hindus (Mishra & Tiwari, 2022).

### Resistance and hope

Anti-caste thinkers and activists in India have inspired many women, students, and radicals to think beyond caste and religious divides and change their perceptions towards love, marriage, and relationships. However, their voices are not heard loudly enough, and their lessons still go largely ignored. Indian feminist scholars have critically engaged with the Western literature on marriage, while contextualizing marriage and analysing the diversity of caste and caste hierarchies in marriage practices in their own country. They have looked at the complex relationship between arranged and choice marriages from the perspectives of class, caste, and sexuality (Rao et al., 2005; Chowdhry, 2009; Pariwala & Kaur, 2018; Sahgal, 2020). Because women's movements in post-colonial India were led by upper caste and upper class women, they have been criticized by Dalit women activists for their inability to prioritize caste alongside class, gender, and sexuality (George & Kannabiran, 2007; Rege, 1998). Dalit feminist scholarship provides a departure point for analysing the multiple versions of Hindu local patriarchies. In the midst of rising caste violence, anti-caste thinkers are increasingly aware of the symbolism of inter-caste marriages (Yengde, 2022). As marriage remains a focal point of caste and religious assertions and atrocities, earlier anti-caste thinkers' writings on and resistance to caste-based marriages can inspire a new generation of feminists and anti-caste thinkers in India.

Inter-caste and inter-religious marriages embody conflicting positions within marriage practices in India. Though not all such marriages involve hierarchies and lead to violence, it is important to further investigate inter-caste marriages, particularly to identify the role of caste in cases of violence leading to marriage murders. While the Indian legal and political systems have addressed failures and conflict within arranged marriages, both inter-caste and inter-religious, the social, political, and legal contexts have proven more nuanced and challenging.

Individuals who engage in inter-caste or inter-religious relationships or marriages in controversial circumstances and then experience a violation of their rights, harassment, humiliation, or other forms of trouble in their chosen relationship, face pressure to hide their difficulties and continue in those relationships in order to prove right the choice they made. Individuals who commit to relationships beyond the restrictions of caste, religion, family, community, and the rules of local patriarchies are thus deprived of support and forced to hide any vulnerability. This recalls the familiar reading of marriage itself as a problematic patriarchal institution, whether in inter-caste or inter-religious unions or in the context of queer or non-heterosexual relationships.

In India, within the Dalit and Adivasi communities, caste and sub-caste divisions have intensified in recent years, within the broader context of heightened caste and religious politics (Bremán & Ghanshyam, 2022). Increasing incidence of marriage murders and 'love jihad' have lent support to Hindu nationalism, which calls for an imagined unity embodied in the worst forms of caste practices. Extremist notions of Hindutva ideology manifest hatred and contempt towards lower castes, other religions, and women in general, aimed at keeping them under the social control of local patriarchies. The new laws and ordinances against inter-religious marriage passed in some states of India to halt conversions from Hinduism reveal the growth of unchallenged support for Brahmanical, Hindu nationalist versions of civil rights in relationships, marriage, and the family. Yet, even against this backdrop of challenges and fears, young people in India continue to fall in love and enter into relationships irrespective of caste and religion.

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