

Marriage in modern India: Does caste still matter for mate selection?

blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2012/10/03/marriage-in-modern-india-does-caste-still-matter-for-mate-selection/

2012-10-3

LSE's **Maitreesh Ghatak**, **Abhijit Banerjee** (MIT), **Esther Duflo** (MIT), and **Jeanne Lafortune** (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile) analyse why a strong preference for intra-caste marriages endures despite changing economic incentives, which should have made characteristics such as education or income more attractive. This article is the second instalment of a three-part series on changing marriage norms among middle-class Indians.

Marriage is, among other things, an important economic decision. Sorting in families has an impact on child outcomes and the accumulation of human capital, and consequently, on long-term economic development and inequality. In developing countries, where many women do not work outside their homes, marriage is arguably the single most important determinant of a woman's economic future. For the most part, marriage is taken as an economic decision, managed by parents more often than by the prospective spouses. And yet, status-like attributes, such as caste, continue to play a seemingly crucial role in determining marriage outcomes in India (in a recent opinion poll in India, 74 per cent of respondents declared themselves opposed to inter-caste marriage). In a recent paper titled "[Marry for What? Caste and Mate Selection in Modern India](#)", Ghatak, Banerjee, Duflo, and Lafortune analyse how preferences for a non-economic characteristic such as caste can affect equilibrium patterns of matching in the context of middle-class Indian arranged marriages.

MATRIMONIALS

WANTED BRIDES

BY CASTE

KAYASTHA

ADVOCATE 31/5'8" gora, h'some. Seek gori girl. Br. Fa Advocate. S. P. Saxena, A 40/5, Shastrinagar, Bareilly U.P. 0581 2413019, 98375 44419

PROF Qlfd B'ful Gori Girl for h'some 30/174 Fair boy serving in Hotels of Canada drawing CN \$40-000+ perks living with maternal Uncle Ph: 9871202561 Send BHP Write Box.No DEL 204593R Times of India, New Delhi - 02

KAYASTHA Boy 33/6' Born & tld. U.S.A Law Graduate & cenced Attorney also comted requirement for C.A. paring final Exam. Working t time with a National Tax, p. seeks educated slim r more girl of respt. family nts visiting India 15th 06 Contact 0522-2761453, or OMS181@yahoo.com

SAXENA 29/159 MCA 2 LPA Executive Software Company Mumbai. Seeks Qualified Beautiful girl. Contact Ph. 0562-2543163.

SRIV h'some fair boy MBA 29y / 6' 5Lpa Branch Mgr Citibank invited b'ful fair prof. qlfd/Post graduate N'Mgk. M: 09825013647, 09425952146

WELL settld Smart, H'some Kayastha Sriv 73/5'11" S/W Eng. Top MNC Pune seek Prof., Qlfd., B'ful bride from well Cultured Family. PUN 806518C The TOI Pune-4

GORI tall for h'some Sriv 25/5'8" M.Com; MBA (Study-ing) Officer known MNC Father Sr Cl I Officer. 0522-2421638, M: 09415423890.

MATCH for Kayastha boy 32/5'6"/ 5-6 LPA, h'some, BE Civil, own business, well settled at Pune seeking for fair, slim, prof qlfd girl. Ph: 09415289763/ 09305097730

SAXENA Boy 71/5'9", Captain Merchant Navy, very Hand-some, Early Marriage. 022-32448683/ 9870120225.

31/5'7" Soft ware Engineer (IIT), working in reputed Multinational Company, USA seeks a beautiful, fair, slim, Post Graduate Science/ Com-merce/ Professionally qual-ified 5'3" to 5'3" girl. Contact with B.H.P to Dr. J N Pat. 61/3D/ 4/ Gayatri Nagar, Allahabad-211002(U.P.) Ph: 09415636643

JAIN Garg N-Melk 2 MBA Partner Petroleum Industry seek qlfd gir BHP Write Box.No X222650R Times of Ind Delhi-110002

B'FUL prof qlfd v bride 4 h'some fair, Sr SW Engr. Top N 9.11.79/23.32/Lko/U status Family Email pawanjain49@yahoo M:09837085438

WELL settled J years/170cm/MB /6 lacs yr at Mun for beautiful, q Contact Box M Times of India email: npallavi

PROF qly S/ handsome 28/ working TCS DEL 205019R New Delhi peeyushniy

MATCH 28/5'6" BE (11L) ALL Send BHP 316091C T galore-01

SAHU-TELI

SAHU boy 28/5'10" fair hand-some Soft Engr in MNC seek prof. beautiful girl. Send BHP to 4/14, Vishal Khand, Gomti Nagar, Lucknow # 0522-2397065

TELI 27/5'4"/BE Assistant Manager Indian Airlines (Govt.) in Delhi seeks Tech. qualified wrkg gori b'ful girl. Ph: 09433449159/0612-2364938

3 Boys 29/5'4", 25/5'6", 22/5'5". All Graduates, Seprate Busi-ness, own Houses Seeks B'ful, Educated Girls. Cont: Krishna Dairy, HUDA Main Market, Panipat (M) 098960-34966.

SWARNKAR

The authors point out that it is well known that non-meritocratic social preferences (i.e. caste) can impede economic efficiency. Moreover, there is the view that economic forces tend to undermine institutions or preferences that impose large economic costs on people. In this context, "Marry for What?" is an attempt to understand why the stated role of caste in marriage remains so strong.

To determine whether caste actually matters in the choice of a spouse among the Indian middle class, the authors follow the methodology developed in Hitsch, Hortacsu, and Ariely (2010) and Fisman et al. (2008) for studying

partner choice in the United States. They applied the methodology to a dataset based on interviews with 783 families who placed newspaper matrimonial ads in a major Bengali newspaper (around 50 per cent of the sample lives or works in Kolkata and slightly less than half consider their family as originating from West Bengal. This study is not meant to be a characterisation of the marriage market in India, but a description of how one particular market works). Ad-placers were asked to rank the letters they have received in response to their ad, and list the letters they are planning to follow up with; these responses were then used to estimate the marginal rate of substitution between caste and other attributes.

The authors found evidence for very strong own-caste preferences; their estimates suggest that the bride's side would be willing to trade off the difference between no education and a master's degree in the prospective husband to avoid marrying outside their caste. For men seeking brides, the own caste effect is twice the effect of the difference between a self-described "very beautiful" woman and a self-described "decent-looking" one. Interestingly, this preference for caste seems much more horizontal than vertical: the authors saw little interest in "marrying up" in the caste hierarchy among both men and women, but a strong preference for in-caste matches. They conclude that the equilibrium price of caste, which is the opportunity cost of the marriage option that one has to give up to marry in caste, tends to be quite low. One possible reason why caste persists, therefore, is that it actually does not cost very much to marry within caste.

To clarify their findings, the authors also explored the possibility that caste is a shortcut for the prospective spouse's background and culture. Starting with background, while it is true that, in general, lower-ranked castes have "worse" characteristics, there is a large amount of overlap. About 40 per cent of individuals of the lowest-ranked caste are more educated than the median Brahmin (among those reporting their education level). Similar statistics were obtained when looking at income, occupational scores and skin tones. There is thus little evidence, in this population, that caste is a perfect proxy for other attractive attributes of individuals.

It turns out that ad-placers are more likely to follow up with people from their own caste, which reflects a true preference for eventually marrying within the same caste. This preference seems to be related to caste itself, rather than characteristics caste could be a proxy for. Compared to the other attributes, this preference also appears to be extremely strong: it appears that the parents of prospective grooms or brides would be willing to give up a lot to ensure that their child marries within their caste.

Further, the authors computed the set of stable matches that would arise in the sample population if preferences were exactly as estimated except that all caste variables were ignored. They found that the percentage of intra-caste marriages drops dramatically. This implies that caste is not just a proxy for other characteristics households also care about and that there are several potential matches for each individual, both inside and outside his or her caste. At the same time, the authors also found that individuals are matched with spouses who are very similar on all non-caste characteristics to the mate they would have selected when caste was included within one's preferences.

A number of conclusions follow from this: first, there is no reason to expect that economic growth by itself will undermine caste-based preferences in marriage. Second, caste-based preferences in marriage are unlikely to be a major constraint on growth. Finally, one might worry that if caste becomes less important, inequality might increase along other dimensions as we will see more assortative matching. But given that the matching is already close to being assortative, this is probably not an important concern.

In conclusion, however, the authors note that there are trends suggesting that caste-based preferences might be changing. Despite the value placed on caste and its low equilibrium price, 30 per cent of people in the sample population did not marry within their caste. In part, this is due to heterogeneity in caste preferences, with some people having caste-neutral preferences. But there is something else. About 40 per cent of the sons and daughters of respondents eventually marry through a channel other than the ads (e.g., through friends and family networks), and 20 per cent enter into a "love marriage". This suggests that while economic forces have not been able to undermine the role of caste-based preferences on marriage market outcomes, these preferences themselves might be undergoing significant changes.

For more information on this topic, including the study's model, data set, methodology, and results analysis, see A. Banerjee, E. Duflo, M. Ghatak, and J. Lafortune, "[Marry for What? Caste and Mate Selection in Modern India](#)", National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 14958 (May 2009).

Click [here](#) to read an interview with Dr Henrike Donner on the middle-class ideal of an Indian marriage, the first instalment of the series.

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