

Sex Ratios, Cross-Region Marriages and the Challenge to Caste Endogamy in Haryana

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In the wake of shortage of brides due to an imbalanced sex ratio, present-day Haryana is witnessing a rise in inter-caste marriages, mostly in the form of cross-region unions. This paper points out that such unions are accepted locally in the face of necessity. Although apprehensions have been raised about cross-region brides and their children facing caste discrimination, several studies have found this to be largely untrue. In cross-region marriages, the caste difference between the spouses is an important factor, not in terms of it being a ground for discrimination, but in terms of the adjustments that cross-region brides have to make to follow new caste practices after marriage.

The institution of monogamous, heterosexual marriage is contingent, among other things, on the availability of a more or less equal proportion of males and females in any population grouping. Imbalanced sex ratios pose a direct threat to this institution, which is near universal and compulsory in many parts of Asia. The effect of long-standing imbalanced sex ratios in many countries in Asia such as China, South Korea, and India has been a male marriage squeeze.¹ Statistics bear testimony to the magnitude of the problem. Birth sex ratios in several Asian countries fall outside the established norm of 105-07 male births for every 100 female births.² It has been projected that by 2030 there will be 660 million men between the ages of 20 and 50 in India and China, but only 597 million women. More than 60 million men will therefore face the prospect of not finding a bride. This alone will compromise Asia's tradition of universal marriage (*Economist* 2011).

The shortage of women in marriageable cohorts is being handled by societies in numerous ways. The practices are far from consistent. To meet the shortage of marriageable women, China is fuelling a brisk business in trafficked brides from Vietnam and North Korea (Demick 2003). There is also a rise in the Chinese practice of adopting and raising a girl child to be later incorporated as a bride in the household (Das Gupta and Li 1999; Zhang 2006). Other countries are resorting to more cross-border marriages (see Constable 2003; Davin 2008; Fan and Huang 1998; Yang and Lu 2010). In view of the bride shortage, Koreans are importing brides from China (ethnic Koreans), Vietnam, the Philippines, and even Uzbekistan (Kim 2013).

In India too, the situation has generated a variety of responses. British administrator Malcolm Darling (1928: 54) noted the prevalence of polyandry in colonial Punjab due to spousal shortage, with brides often purchased from the hills of Kangra and the deserts of Bikaner. The works of Pettigrew (1975) and Hershman (1981) on Punjab and Jeffery and Jeffery (1997) on Uttar Pradesh also reveal that polyandry was prevalent among the landowning castes due to spousal shortage and concerns about land fragmentation. It was also not uncommon to find households where men were deliberately forced to stay single in what Kaur (2008) refers to as "involuntary bachelorhood". In India, there is evidence of a return to the practice of fraternal polyandry in Punjab and Haryana (Kaur 2004). As an alternative response, the north and north-western parts of India are also witnessing an increase in long

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distance, cross-region marriages (Kaur 2004, 2008, 2012; Blanchet 2008; Ahlawat 2009; Chaudhry and Mohan 2011) where rural men are breaching the conventional marriage norms of caste endogamy, *gotra* (patrilineal clan) exogamy, village and territorial exogamy (extending over several villages), and hypergamy.³

Conventional marriages in India are usually arranged between individuals belonging to the same caste, region, religion, class, and culture. The marriage rules ensure that the basic cultural environment in which a girl functions after marriage is broadly familiar to her (Kaur 2012). However, in the face of growing bride shortage, poor rural men are importing “cultural strangers” as brides from distant parts of the country and even beyond, from countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh. Such marriages transgress the boundaries of caste, region, language, culture, and sometimes even religion. The implications of some of the “differences” between grooms and brides in such marriages have been documented in the existing literature. It highlights the difficulties that women imported for marriage from culturally distinct regions experience in terms of learning a new language, getting accustomed to local norms and rituals, and adopting new dietary patterns and clothing practices. Kaur (2004, 2008) points out how difficult it was for Bengali women who were fond of eating meat, fish, and rice to adjust to a vegetarian and wheat-based diet. The cross-region brides who came to Haryana found the veil very constraining as Hindu women outside the north do not observe *purdah* and are not accustomed to it. The problems experienced in learning a new language and the communication gap that results from it have been mentioned in the works of Chaudhry and Mohan (2011) and Ahlawat (2009).

This paper explores another aspect of the “difference” between spouses by focusing on the inter-caste nature of cross-region unions. Unlike conventional marriages, most cross-region marriages in India are inter-caste unions. Such marriages are on the rise in Haryana and are being gradually accepted as “normal”. Given the high premium that is placed on the norm of caste endogamy in north India, it is important to explore the circumstances under which this norm is being breached in such marriages propelled by the shortage of brides. It becomes all the more important to do so in the wake of the extreme violence that has been meted out to some men and women who have entered into marriages of their own choice breaching the norms of caste endogamy (Chowdhry 2007; Kaur 2010).

Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this paper attempts to answer the following questions. Why is caste endogamy an important consideration in marriage negotiations? What are the conditions under which the overarching norm of caste endogamy is breached and by whom? Does the phenomenal rise in the number of cross-region marriages signify a weakening of caste norms? What are the reasons behind the differential acceptance of local inter-caste marriages and cross-region inter-caste marriages? What is the impact of the inter-caste nature of these unions on the marital experiences of

cross-region brides? What repercussions can it lead to if the phenomenon continues unabated?

Brief Note on the Fieldwork

The fieldwork for this study was conducted between August 2012 and April 2013 in five villages of two districts of Haryana – Akbarpur Barota, Pabsera, and Jakholi in Sonapat district, and Kagsar and Sorkhi in Hisar district. The northern state of Haryana, along with its neighbour Punjab, has been in focus as the state with the most unfavourable girl child ratio. Within Haryana, Sonapat district being a part of the National Capital Region (NCR) has undergone immense economic transformation in recent years, but this economic growth has not translated into social development as seen in its sex ratio figures, which stand at 853 (overall) and 790 (0-6 years) as per the 2011 Census. In contrast to Sonapat, which is close to the national capital, Hisar district is in the interior and shares one of its borders on the west with Rajasthan. It has not been subject to the urban influence of Delhi, and though not as bad as Sonapat, its sex ratio stands at 871 (overall) and 849 (0-6 years) as per the 2011 Census. The figures in both districts point to a high numerical deficit of females in relation to the male population.

The reason behind choosing these five different villages was to capture a sample that is heterogeneous in terms of caste as cross-region marriages in India are occurring among all caste groups. In Jakholi, Sorkhi and Kagsar villages, the dominant castes are Chauhan, Jat and Brahmin, respectively, all of which belong to the upper-caste category. Sorkhi also has a substantial scheduled caste (sc) population. Pabsera’s preponderant caste group is Sainis (Other Backward Class; oBC), who make up almost 80% of the population. Akbarpur Barota has a more balanced combination of all caste groups.

Fieldwork Data at a Glance

There were 47 cross-region brides spread across the five villages covered in this study, of whom 43 were from the states of Bihar (eight), West Bengal and Kerala (seven each), Assam (six), Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh (five each), and Tripura, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh (one each). The remaining four were from Nepal. Except for the Kerala brides, who had studied up to class 10 or 12 (one also had training in nursing), most of the other brides were either uneducated or had very little education. Among the husbands of cross-region brides, 12 had studied up to class 10, 11 till class 8, 13 till class 5, and the remaining 11 did not have any schooling.

The average number of members in the brides’ natal and marital families was 6.7 and 4.4, respectively, which indicated that these women came from large families. They were not economically well off as their parents were either unemployed or worked as manual labourers, except for one bride whose father owned five acres of land and was a farmer. The husbands of 16 brides owned land ranging between two and five *killas* (acres) and were agriculturists, while most of the others worked as daily wage labourers and factory workers, and two ran small shops.

The age at marriage of the brides ranged between 14 and 28 years. The newest bride in this study was married only five months ago, while the oldest bride came to Haryana 47 years ago. Cross-region marriages were secondary marriages for nine grooms and two brides.⁴ In a scenario where local women are not available even for never-married men who rank low in the marriage market, finding a local match for men who have already been married is extremely difficult.

The reasons that men gave for entering into cross-region marriages were unemployment, lack of education, shortage of girls, having small or no landholding, alcoholism, physical disability, tainted reputation, the absence of an older man in the family who could spread the word on his son seeking a match (especially in families where men lived with their widowed mothers), and the absence of an unmarried sister who could be given in exchange (especially among the poorer Jats in Sorkhi). Most women on the other hand cited poverty and inability to meet the dowry demands of the grooms as reasons for entering into cross-region marriages. Three brides also cited being socially over age by local standards as the reason for marrying into families far away. One Kerala bride said that she was driven by the desire to live in a new place.

Most of these marriages were arranged by former cross-region brides.⁵ Some were also arranged by the husbands of cross-region brides. Four marriages, all with Assamese women, were arranged by a female go-between (not a cross-region bride herself) who had links in Assam. In one case, the marriage was arranged by the groom's brother with a Bengali woman who had migrated to Delhi. The marriage expenditure in all these cases was met by the groom's side. In three cases, the women were duped and later "sold" as brides in exchange for money. Of these three cases, two involved close relatives, while the third involved a person who was not related to the bride's family.

Under the effect of a long-standing sex ratio imbalance, the customary rules of caste endogamy, *gotra* exogamy, territorial exogamy and hypergamy are being compromised.⁶ In the tight marriage market, many men (particularly the uneducated, unemployed, disabled and landless) are being left out. As per the 2001 Census, in the 15-59 years age group, the number of never-married males in Haryana was 2,068,085 (32.28%) while the number of never-married females was 9,18,888 (16.27%).

As such, many more men than earlier are resorting to cross-region marriages. A break-up according to the number of years of marriage for the 47 cross-region brides shows how the influx has increased over the years (Table 1).

Cross-region marriages are not restricted to one or two particular caste groups. There is ample evidence of these

Table 1: Duration of Marriage of the 47 Brides

Married for	Number of Brides
Less than 10 years	29
11-20 years	8
21-30 years	7
31-40 years	1
More than 40 years	2

marriages occurring among all caste categories – the landowning ones, the ritually higher ones, various occupational *jatis* (an endogamous unit within which one must marry), and the lower castes (Kaur 2004). In this

study, cross-region marriages were found in 11 caste groups (Table 2).

Table 2: Distribution of Castes into which the Cross-Region Brides Are Married

Caste	Number of Brides	Category
Jats (landowning)	12	Upper caste
Chauhan (landowning)	7	
Brahmin (priestly caste)	2	
Goswami (sub-caste of brahmins)	2	
Punjabi (post-partition migrants)	2	
Saini	12	OBC
Kumhar (potter)	1	
Jogi	2	
Bairagi	2	
Nai (barber)	1	
Valmiki/harijan (sweeper)	4	Scheduled caste
Total number of brides	47	

The *jatis* from which the brides hailed included Baniya and Panwar (upper castes); Ahir, Tiyya, Dhobi, Halwai, Jogi and Kurmi (OBC); and Kami, Magar, Chamar, Vishwakarma, Valmiki, Khatik, Mandal and Jatav (SC). There was only one inter-religious marriage (a Muslim bride from Tripura married to a Hindu man). Mostly all the marriages were inter-caste.

Table 3: Caste Composition of Cross-Region Couples

Husbands→	SC	OBC	Upper Caste
Brides↓			
SC	2	6	4
OBC	1	8	13
Upper caste	1	1	1

Of the 47 brides, the caste background of 10 could not be ascertained. These cases have been omitted in the table, leaving a total of 37.

terms of the categories of upper caste, SC and OBC, a high degree of intermarriage was noted, as illustrated in Table 3.

The sections that follow discuss the importance of the norms of caste endogamy in marriage negotiations.

Importance of Caste Endogamy

Caste endogamy in India was and remains the basic norm of all marriages, so much so that it is often considered the cornerstone of the caste system in India. As Dumont (1980: 109) explains, "The regulation of marriage is an expression of the principle of separation: castes separate themselves from one another by prohibiting marriages outside the group". Ghurys (1991) too identifies restrictions on marriage as one of the six features of the Hindu caste system.⁷ In prescribing endogamy, the caste system ensures its own reproduction. This is because marriage is particularly associated with procreation. The practice of marrying and having children within one's own caste group ensures that both the group and the hierarchy among groups remain in place. Emphasising the importance of endogamous marriages in children's upbringing, Davis notes,

The requirements of status ascription in a caste order practically require the marriage of equals. A wife reared in a social stratum widely different from her husband's is apt to inculcate ideas and behaviour incompatible with the position the children will inherit from their father thus creating a hiatus between status and their role (1941: 378).

The stress on maintaining caste endogamy is found not only among the upper castes, but also among those who are lower down in the hierarchy. In her work on Delhi's urban poor,

Grover notes a “rigid caste endogamy amongst balmikis” (2011: 211). Chowdhry notes that in Haryana,

The lower caste groups are as much hierarchy ridden and caste status conscious as the upper caste groups ...denied any claims of honour in relation to upper castes, the lower castes therefore become hypersensitive in defending it within their own castes. Such a concept of honour can not only be claimed but also defended and implemented (2007: 20).

Communities often devise new matrimonial strategies to consolidate the norm of endogamy, as is evident in the case of the Maheshwari (caste of the industrial community of marwaris) community, which organises marriage fairs to facilitate endogamous marriages of poor and middle-class maheshwaris and where admission of non-maheshwaris is refused on the grounds that “this would conflict with the basic aim of the fair, which is to favour endogamy” (Pache 1998: 972). However, despite the strong insistence on maintaining endogamy, there are conditions under which this norm is often breached.

Breaching Endogamy: Situations and Reactions

Hegemonic as it may be, the norm of caste endogamy is violated in many situations. As we know, in marriage arrangements, along with the norm of endogamy, hypergamy was followed whereby girls always married “up”. The systematic practice of hypergamy often puts elite women and destitute men at the risk of not getting married at all. Dumont notes that the outcome to this problem was found in systematic elimination of daughters at the top (as among the rajputs) and by men entering into “unions of inferior status with women of other castes” (1980: 118). Recourse to inter-caste marriages was also sought by the poor, aged and disabled who often failed to marry within their caste grouping.

In addition to this, the need for women’s labour often compelled men to transcend caste boundaries in finding wives. The history of agricultural communities shows that not all families were able to conform to ideal marriage norms and many a times settled for less-preferred matches. Darling (1928) notes that for the agricultural communities marriage was not only a religious duty, but also an “economic necessity”. This is because in agrarian communities, women’s labour extends beyond the household and reproductive labour into the realms of agriculture and animal husbandry. To meet the requirement of women’s labour, Darling notes that “a jat will sometimes marry almost any woman he can” (1928: 58). Speaking in the context of the colonial government’s attitude to inter-caste marriages, Chowdhry notes that “intercaste marriages – both between high-caste men and low-caste women and vice-versa – have existed in Punjab-Haryana and these were duly supported by the guardians of the women involved though were frowned upon by the British officials” (2007: 46). She notes how “jats were particularly noted for marrying women from lower caste groups such as the Nai, Mali, Jogi, Jhemar and very often from among the Chamars” (2007: 47).

The practice of female infanticide in the north and north-western region has also made strict adherence to caste endogamy difficult, as due to spousal shortages, men often turn to other castes to find brides. In Punjab, the scarcity of

women resulting from female infanticide forced many Jat brothers to practise polyandry by purchasing a lower-caste woman belonging to the sweeper or tanner caste as a wife for all of them (Hershman 1981: 179-180). The children born of these unions were sometimes ridiculed as *chuhri ke* (born of a Chuhra mother) or *chamaran ke* (born of a Chamar mother) but they were considered legitimate and had the right to inherit land (Chowdhry 2007: 47). Parry (1979) also shows that Rajput men often married women from lower castes, sometimes even from the untouchable communities.

Caste endogamy is also sometimes neglected in “self-choice marriages” where couples enter into conjugal relationships based on their personal liking for each other. These inter-caste marriages have been documented in a number of studies (see, among others, Kannan 1963; Corwin 1997; Mody 2002; Chowdhry 2007; Grover 2011; Dhanda 2012). The responses that these marriages generate may vary from complete/partial/delayed acceptance to familial or social boycott, acceptance or discrimination of the children born of the union, and even extreme violence.

A young person who marries outside the jati may not only alienate his or her natal family and extended kin, but also make it difficult for his or her parents to arrange a licit marriage within the group for other offsprings (Kolenda 1978: 92). Grover notes how couples involved in inter-caste self-choice marriages often faced strong parental opposition or were sometimes forced to separate from each other. At times they also succeeded in establishing reconnections with their families after eloping (2011: 89-92). However, there are also instances where the experiences of couples involved in inter-caste marriages have been marked by extreme violence at the hands of family and community.

Chowdhry’s work on inter-caste marriages in Haryana shows that although many castes and communities are involved in inter-caste marriages that defy customary norms and have no social acceptance, it is marriages between dalits and non-dalits that make social wrath assume a virulent form (2007: 140). Such cases, she argues, “represent a high point in the ongoing conflictual relationship between dalits and non-dalits and are viewed as forms of dalit assertion”. However, violence is not limited to marriages where one of the parties is much lower down in the hierarchy of castes. It is also evident in cases where the caste groups involved are equivalent or higher, as Chowdhry’s study of marriage between a Brahmin boy and Jat girl illustrates (2007: 158). The negative attitude of khap panchayats towards inter-caste marriages, often epitomised in “honour killings”, has been documented extensively in the literature (Chowdhry 2007; Kaur 2010, Ahlawat 2012; Kachhwaha 2011 among others).⁸

Differential Acceptance

While on the one hand Haryanavi society inflicts extreme violence on its own youth for breaching the norms of caste and gotra endogamy, on the other, it brings in cultural strangers as brides from distant lands whose caste backgrounds are very often ignored, unknown, or difficult to ascertain given the

regional variation in caste names and the associated status and ranking across the country. This apparent contradiction in the attitude of Haryanvi society towards local and cross-region inter-caste alliances is seen in allowing needy local men to break the norms, while policing local women more stringently.

Caste, as we know, exercises a greater corporate control on women than men in marriage arrangements. Evidence shows that women's marriages are policed more strictly by families and communities, and their attempts to marry a man from a lower caste is always discouraged as it signifies an attempt to weaken caste boundaries. Parents in Haryana strongly prefer to marry their "own" daughters in "appropriate" marriages. Being considered the repositories of family and community honour, women who violate caste endogamy are severely punished for they are seen as bringing dishonour. In inter-caste marriages in Haryana, women are more likely than men (unless they are dalits) to become victims of violence and they are either killed or forced to commit suicide, all in the name of preserving family honour (Chowdhry 2007: 10-11). By giving away their own daughters in conventional normative marriages, families succeed in preserving their local standing and reputation. However, in bringing in "other" women as cross-region brides, families often put forth the logic of the absolute necessity of having a woman to run a household – "*Roti pani k kivad to aurata te hi khule sae*", which roughly translates as "Only a woman can open the doors to food and water".

Interviews with unmarried men revealed that many of them were contemplating bringing a bride from far away ("*dur te le aavenge*") if they failed to find one locally. The ease with which people talked about it hints at the widespread acceptance of such marriages in present-day Haryana. Society is actually encouraging such liaisons as a matter of necessity (Chowdhry 2011: 255). Recently, this phenomenon has begun making inroads into castes that had earlier abstained from it – the Brahmins and Goswamis (Table 2). Interviews with men from ritually superior castes revealed how until a few years back this practice was "unthinkable" for them ("*koi soch bhi na sake sae*"), but now people are doing it ("*ib log karein sae*").

Even though these are inter-caste marriages, they do not experience the same violence that local inter-caste marriages face. This is because, first, these marriages are not self-choice marriages but driven by circumstances. So they are not interpreted as rebellious or seeking to challenge familial authority. It is the need (*zarurat*) for a woman to maintain the family that drives men to transcend normative boundaries. In talking about cross-region brides, people spoke with a shared understanding of the kind of problems a family faces in the absence of a woman. Second, unlike local inter-caste marriages, these marriages do not negatively affect the local caste hierarchy and family prestige as the bride's family is in a distant region. As Kaur aptly notes,

This differential acceptability (of local inter-caste marriages and cross-region inter-caste marriages) can possibly be explained by the fact that inter-caste marriage within a village or between neighbouring villages impacts the local standing of families much more than when

one spouse is non-local. The "behaviour" of local women has consequences for both their natal and marital families. It further affects the marriage prospects of their siblings. The "foreign" women, whose origins are somewhat suspect, are measured with a different rod; they are tolerated as long as they try to conform sufficiently to local norms. (2004: 2602; brackets added).

Third, concealing the caste background of a cross-region bride is easy as hardly anyone except the immediate family (or the few men who went to the natal region of the bride with the groom at the time of marriage) knows about the caste antecedents of the bride's family. If awkward questions are asked, the men sometimes justify their marriages by saying, "She is from our caste, but they have a different caste name there". Finally, though some non-dalit men ask for brides from "clean castes" (Kaur 2012: 84), the overarching discourse that surrounds these marriages is that women do not have a caste of their own (*biran ki kai jaat*). Before marriage they are members of their father's caste group and after marriage they acquire membership of their husband's caste. Interestingly, this point is never made in relation to local inter-caste marriages.

That the brides in cross-region marriages are from other castes is not a very contentious issue in itself. This section highlights that Haryanvi society has accepted this as a "normal" phenomenon. In what follows, I attempt a critique of the overarching construction of cross-region brides as discriminated against, abused, and victimised owing to their pre-marital caste identities.

Caste Discrimination and Cross-Region Marriages

Popular constructions often portray cross-region marriages as cases of bride trafficking and see them as highly oppressive, coercive, and discriminatory for the incoming women (Blanchet 2008; Kant and Pandey 2003). Despite contrary evidence of these women making stable homes with their husbands in long-lasting monogamous unions (Kaur 2004; Chaudhry and Mohan 2011), these marriages are often labelled "dubious", "marriage of sorts" and "difficult to prove legally" (Chowdhry 2011, 2007).

A recent survey of cross-region marriages in Haryana and Rajasthan by Kukreja and Kumar (2013) largely focuses on the issues of caste discrimination, internal racism and colourism faced by cross-region brides. The authors talk about "institutionalised rejection" meted out to cross-region brides in both public and private spaces, whereby they are branded by the family and the local community as "the other, as lower caste and as inferior". There are certain problems with this kind of a portrayal. First, the study does not disclose the caste backgrounds of the 1,247 cross-region brides covered in the survey. All cross-region brides in the study are assumed to be low caste even if they are not. My own data shows that cross-region brides in Haryana are not only from the low castes, but also from high and intermediate castes. Second, it is important to remember that this report has been written for a western audience. Issues of racism and colourism may hold salience in the western context but not so much in India, where consideration of skin colour is an integral part of the process of matchmaking.

A cursory look at the matrimonial section in any newspaper would reveal how deeply ingrained the preference for “fair-skinned girls” is in marriage negotiations. The works of Vatuk (1972) and Kodoth (2008) have noted how notions of beauty, particularly fair skin, are central in marriage discussions.

Studies have also raised concerns about the status of children born of cross-region marriages. Kukreja and Kumar argue that these children “are seen as a ‘diluted’ race and not ‘pure’ Haryanavi or pure ‘jat’ for the simple fact that their mothers belong to a different caste and region” (2013: 44). Chowdhry argues that “there is a lack of recognition for the offspring of such alliances and people in Haryana fear that the racial profile of the region will change (*Haryana ki to nasal hi badal jaegi*)” (2011: 257). This was not found to be true by this study as also by other studies that have noted that the children of cross-region couples are not discriminated against (Kaur 2012; Chaudhry and Mohan 2011; Singh nd). Apprehensions have also been raised about the marital prospects of these children (Kukreja and Kumar 2013; Chowdhry 2011). Kaur also documents that cross-region couples feel that their children will face difficulties in finding spouses within the local community because of their mother’s status (2012: 86). In my sample, however, there were seven cross-region brides whose children, both boys and girls, had got married and all of them were married as per customary caste norms. They denied facing problems because of the caste status of their mother. The problems that some of them faced in the process of matcmaking, especially sons, had to do with not having a stable source of income, little education, alcoholism, and not having a *pucca* house. But this applies to a vast majority of young unmarried males in Haryana and has nothing to do with the caste status of the mother. However, it would be misleading to generalise on this matter on the basis of just a few brides. For a more authoritative conclusion, more research needs to be done on the marital prospects of children of cross-region couples.

It is important to clarify that I am not ruling out the possibility of caste discrimination in these marriages. There may be specific cases of it, but they are very small in number. In my study, I found just one case of caste-based discrimination. This was the case of 23-year-old Sunita, a Valmiki girl from Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh, who was married to Somjeet, a 31-year-old brahmin boy in Kagsar village. Somjeet had turned 29 and no proposals (*rishtas*) were forthcoming because he was unemployed. This was also delaying the marriage of his younger brother Paramjeet, who was then 26 and working as a mechanic in an automobile workshop and for whom two proposals had already come. It was then that the family decided to go in for a cross-region marriage for Somjeet. Sunita faced caste discrimination when she was referred to as “*chudi*” by her mother-in-law almost three months into the marriage.⁹ Now married for a year, Sunita vividly remembers the instance that fuelled this reaction. It happened when the family was not given the ritual *daan* (gift) when their neighbour’s son married, a norm that had been earlier followed (it is customary for a priestly caste like Brahmins to receive gifts from other castes during childbirth, marriages, and so on).

Through a female belonging to their *kunba* (extended family), Sunita’s mother-in-law learnt that they did this because they considered the family’s ritual purity had been compromised when they brought in a lower-caste daughter-in-law. The mother-in-law vented her anger on Sunita by calling her a lower-caste woman who was tainting their relations in the village. In Sunita’s words,

I felt very bad. My family had not hidden our caste status from them before marriage. They knew very well that I was of a lower caste. ... Only my mother-in-law has a problem with me. Talk to my husband and you will see how nice he is, even my father-in-law supports me. My husband even tried to reason with my mother-in-law that I am a brahmin now after marriage but she is still not talking to me. I am sure with time things will improve...my husband often says that if I give her a grandson, she will forget everything.

This case is important in many respects. Just as it hints at the possibility of experiencing caste discrimination and a desire for male progeny, it signals the strong conjugal bond that cross-region couples may share. This power of conjugality may itself be a motivating force for brides to make adjustments in a new cultural set-up.

To uniformly portray all cross-region brides as victims of caste discrimination in inter-caste marriages is to deny the possibility of viewing them as acting, thinking and agential beings. “Understanding the agency role is central to recognising people as responsible persons: not only are we well or ill, but also we act or refuse to act, and can choose to act in one way or the other” (Sen 2000: 190). Kandiyoti’s (1998) concept of “bargaining strategies” is useful in understanding the ways in which cross-region brides act in their marital homes to make tough situations more conducive to them. While it is true that adjusting to a family of another caste is not an easy process for the cross-region bride, the situation may not be as intractable as assumed. The next section examines the effect that inter-caste marriages have on the marital experiences of cross-region brides and the ways in which they make adjustments with respect to their premarital and marital caste differences.

Negotiating Caste Differences

Differences in caste practices become important points of adjustments for brides who have been reared in a social stratum different from their husbands. Cross-region brides for many years before their marriage are brought up and socialised in accordance with the norms operational in their caste with the expectation that they will eventually be married off to someone from the same caste. Things change drastically for those who end up being married into cross-region marriages to men from different caste, culture and region. This section draws on three case studies to show the everyday problems and dilemmas that cross-region brides face in inter-caste marriages and how they negotiate with the norms of the caste into which they are married. It has to be noted how their own caste background and their “past” become important reference points in this process. There is a constant back and forth movement between the past and the present, which comes out strongly in their narratives.

Santo, 21, is from Chamoli district in Uttarakhand and is a Panwar (upper caste) by caste. She is married to Satbir, 25, who is a Valmiki. Married for more than two years, she has been successful in learning the local language, and become accustomed to wearing the *ghunghat* (veil or headscarf), which she found hard in the beginning. But she has not been able to reconcile herself to the relaxed norms surrounding menstruation in her husband's caste. Sociological literature on caste deals with the notions of purity and pollution. There are differences in the strictness and elaborateness of the rules regarding purity and pollution between various regions and castes, but they cover a large sector of life everywhere (Srinivas 1962: 151). In many parts of north India there are certain restrictions placed on girls during menstrual days as it is believed that menstruation renders women impure. These norms are generally maintained among upper-caste women and not so rigorously among the lower castes¹⁰ (Dube 2001).

Santo remembers how after her marriage she did not enter the kitchen to prepare the morning meal when she was menstruating and was rebuked by her father-in-law as he was getting late for work. When she confided in her husband that women in their caste did not enter the kitchen during menstruation, he laughed at her saying, "We don't believe in all this". Reminiscing about her past, she said, "When our date came, our father did not eat food cooked by us. We didn't enter the kitchen then, mother used to do everything. But in their (husband's) caste all this is not followed...In our caste we do work outside the kitchen like mopping the floor but never inside. ...In Garhwal, among the panwars, we never offer food to any elder or older person during our menstrual period ...I detest this practice of not following these rules here." When I asked if this was true of most communities in Chamoli, she said, "No, it is not the same for all. We are panwars, a little lower than pundits, but treated equally. There are doms [sc] in our village, they are low caste. They do not follow these restrictions."

Constable (2003) has argued that all cross-region or cross-border marriages may not imply hypergamy for the women involved. Santo's marriage was a hypogamous union where the bride moved "downwards" in the caste hierarchy. As a high-caste woman, she found it particularly hard to get accustomed to the non-observance of rules regarding menstruation after being married into a lower caste. But Santo has devised a solution to her problem. When I asked her if she had given up on what she used to do before marriage now that she has been married for two years, to my surprise, she said, "No, I still do not enter the kitchen during menstruation. It is Shivani, my elder sister-in-law (another cross-region bride from Kigamijapur, West Bengal), who does the work during those days". When I asked about the days Shivani menstruates, she said, "Shivani is a Jatav [sc] by caste, like them (her husband's family) she also does not believe in all this, but I have convinced her to let me cook on those days". The way Santo has worked out a solution illustrates that cross-region brides cannot be considered passive pawns in a system that is beyond their control. They make small but meaningful attempts to negotiate their lives in a more conducive manner in a new cultural set-up.

Another example to show adjustment to caste norms is that of a Kerala bride, Ananta, who got married to Sadhu, who is a Jat. Ananta is a Tiyya (OBC) by caste. Married for 10 years now, Ananta worked as a nurse before her marriage and earned a decent salary. After her marriage and the birth of two children – a son and a daughter – Ananta thought of resuming her career as a nurse in Haryana as she was well-trained. However, she was denied permission to do so. "Our women do not work outside the home", her husband said. When Ananta tried to reason with her husband by saying that Jat women do work in the fields, he answered that the women work on their own families' land and thus it was a part of their household work. He later explained to her that the nursing profession is not deemed respectful for upper-caste women and that their entire *kunba* and *biradari* (community) would make fun of his family for allowing their daughter-in-law to do so.

Certain castes that engaged with the bodily wastes of others and with the removal of waste from homes and the villages were looked upon as "polluting". The nursing profession is often considered so as caring for the sick brings one into contact with body substances. When Ananta failed to convince her husband despite several attempts, she began thinking of alternative avenues to earn an income in a way the family would deem respectable. After much persuasion, she finally succeeded in getting the permission to work as an *anganwadi* helper, where she has to cook food for the children, an activity that is not looked upon as lowly and defiling.¹¹ The caste norms of her marital family prevented Ananta from making full use of her earning capacity and she had to settle for a meagre wage of Rs 1,000 a month.

Ananta's case reflects how cross-region marriages can imply downward mobility for women, something that is parallel to Oxfeld's (2005) analysis of Hakka women for whom cross-region marriages do not result in them moving higher up the economic ladder. Kaur (2012) has made similar observations on downward mobility in her study of cross-region marriages in Uttar Pradesh. Nursing is an accepted occupation for women in Kerala. That Ananta was made to give it up under upper-caste norms after marriage shows how women's work is often carried out under the impositions and controls of caste. In this case, we must not overlook that Ananta was successful in convincing her family to allow her to work outside the home while conforming to the caste norms operative in her marital home even if it meant a change of profession. She confided that she likes to earn on her own and would have resented her marriage if she had not been granted the opportunity.

The third case that I wish to highlight is of a Bengali, Baniya bride Anjani, who is married to Raju, a Saini in Pabsra. Before her marriage, Anjani was engaged in the home-based work of making bidis. After her marriage, Anjani was expected to work as an agricultural wage labourer in the fields of landowning families like most other Saini brides (both local and cross-regional). Anjani found it very difficult to make this transition from home-based work to work in the fields. She said,

It was not the tough nature of agricultural work that was a problem for me, what was bothering me was the idea of going out of the house to

work. ...In my *pihar* [natal home] my father had never allowed me or my sisters to go out to work. He considered it bad. But here I see all women in my husband's caste work for *dihadi* [daily wage]. Earlier my mother-in-law used to ridicule me for throwing tantrums because I refused to work outside. My husband said if I also work we will be able to earn more but I could not agree...this was something I had never done before. ...There were frequent quarrels in the house because of this. It was then I decided that I would earn, but not through *dihadi*. I learnt how to stitch ladies suits from my *jethani's* [elder sister-in-law's] daughter and now I do this work from home. Women from the village come to me to get their suits stitched. I charge Rs 80 for stitching one suit. If I stitch two suits in one day, I make money equal to one day's *dihadi*. So why go out and work? Now my husband is happy and my mother-in-law also doesn't complain. She even helps me sometimes in doing the work.

Although some Saini families in the village do own land, the Sainis are not a landowning caste. Most of them in the village earn by working as daily wage labourers in other's fields. The intermittent nature of work and the small daily wage necessitates that both husbands and wives work so that they may be able to save money for days when they have no work. Since Anjani was not comfortable working outside in the fields, she found another way of earning money from inside the house.

These three case studies point out that cross-region brides do face difficulties in inter-caste marriages. The expectation of marital families that cross-region brides will conform to their codes of conduct puts severe strain on these brides. However, it does not always weigh them down. As these case studies show, there are small but significant moments in the lives of cross-region brides when they succeed in working out win-win solutions for all concerned.

Conclusions

This paper illustrates that in the wake of bride shortage created due to imbalanced sex ratios, present-day Haryana is witnessing a rise in inter-caste marriages, mostly in the form of cross-region unions. Such unions are accepted locally in the face of necessity and do not face societal and familial violence, as local inter-caste marriages tend to. Although apprehensions have been raised about cross-region brides and their children facing caste discrimination, detailed ethnographic research by several scholars has found this to be largely untrue. In cross-region marriages, the caste difference between spouses is an important factor, not in terms of it being a ground for discrimination, but in terms of the adjustments that the cross-region brides have to make to follow new caste practices after marriage.¹²

However, there are many questions that still remain unresolved. If the phenomenon continues unabated, is there a possibility that the children of cross-region couples may form another sub-caste altogether? Kim notes that the bi-ethnic children of Korean men and other Asian women are referred to as "Kosians" (2013: 84). An important question is what the marital prospects of the offspring of cross-region couples are. Will there be a gender-based variation in their marital prospects with girls getting absorbed locally in the marriage market (if the bride shortage continues) and men being forced to venture out like their fathers? The future trend of sex ratios will play a major role in deciding the trajectory. If, over the years, the sex ratio becomes more balanced, there are chances that cross-region marriages may decline. Longitudinal studies can provide answers to some of these questions.

NOTES

- Spousal shortages can occur for reasons different from imbalanced sex ratios. In countries such as Japan and Taiwan, rural or poor or less-educated men face bride shortages because of women opting to remain unmarried or moving to urban areas for work and marriage (Davin 2005; Yang and Lu 2010). Fan and Huang (1998) have noted spousal shortage in some regions in China owing to rising rates of female emigration to more developed regions. In the Indian context, spousal shortage among the Bedias has been attributed to their prostitution-based economy in which women remain unmarried and engage in prostitution, thereby creating a spousal shortage for Bedia men (Agrawal 2008).
- In 2001, the sex ratio at birth stood at 119 and 113 male births for every 100 female births in China and India respectively (source: China State Statistical Bureau, 2001, and India Registrar General, 2001).
- See Karve (1965) for a discussion of marriage norms in different parts of India.
- In sociological literature a man or a woman's first marriage is referred to as the primary marriage. Any subsequent marriages are considered secondary and not of the same status as the first.
- In this process, they reinforce ties with their natal family, which helps them in overcoming some pain of separation and also helps them to create their own network.
- As a rule, most castes generally exclude three or four gotras from their marriage considerations

- father's (which is also his own) gotra, his mother's gotra, his father's mother's gotra and his mother's mother's gotra (Karve 1965).
- 7 The others being segmental division of society; hierarchy; restrictions on feeding and social intercourse; civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections; and lack of unrestricted choice of occupation (Ghurye 1991).
- 8 The khaps also object to so-called "arranged" marriages that are intracaste but where the match is made between prohibited gotras. Kaur (2010) notes that by issuing diktats to punish such marriages, khap panchayats wish to preserve each gotra's legitimate pool of marriageable girls, which is already limited due to the imbalanced sex ratio and customary norms.
- 9 Local jati name for the sweeper caste.
- 10 This may be so because lower-caste women, in addition to self-pollution (through menstruation and parturition), deal with others' pollution through occupational activities such as midwifery, disposal of dirt, washing of dirty clothes, and many other services.
- 11 Courtyard shelters for children that were established in 1975 under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme of the Government of India
- 12 Palriwala and Uberoi (2008: 28) note that in societies where "the rule of patri(viri)local marriage is predominant, marriage for women entailed a new home and work environment, and possibly even different types of work, structured by new people, relationships and authorities to submit to". Women are expected to conform to the norms and expectations of

their marital families of which they are new members and the burden of adjustment is mostly on them.

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