



The Question of Inter-caste Marriage: A Critical Examination of Selected Punjabi Dalit Short Stories

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Abstract: This paper attempts to trace how far the institution of inter-caste marriage has been successful through a reading of selected Punjabi Dalit short stories. These narratives provide a lens into societal perceptions of inter-caste marriage, which remains a matter of intense scepticism in India's hierarchical caste-based society. Punjab, like the rest of India, predominantly practices endogamy. Endogamy (the act of marrying only within castes) is one of the core features of the caste system. Endogamy is embraced by a group to minimise an externality that arises when group members marry outsiders. Consequently, inter-caste marriages between upper and lower castes face significant orthodox resistance. This paper attempts to study the various influences – religious, social, economic, and political – that regulate marriages in Punjab and India. However, the primary focus is on the religious and social dimensions, particularly the caste system. A successful inter-caste marriage challenges the entrenched caste hierarchy, a concept strongly advocated by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who viewed it as a crucial step towards dismantling the caste system. Using Ambedkar's theoretical framework, this paper analyses two Punjabi Dalit short stories: "Awazar" (Disabled) by Sarup Sialvi and "Vithh" (Gap) written by Prem Gorkhi. Through these stories, the paper investigates the complex dynamics of inter-caste marriages and their implications on the caste-based social order in Punjab.

Keywords: Dalit, patriarchy, endogamy, Ambedkar, inter-caste marriage, caste

Introduction

There can be little doubt that the caste system has been at the core of Indian society, forming the basis of its social structure. In this hierarchical social structure, Dalits have been relegated to the margins. This marginalisation of the Dalits through the hierarchical social system, often overlooked in the mainstream literature by upper caste writers, finally found a voice in Dalit literature. Influenced by the writings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and movements such as the Black Panthers in America, the Dalit Panthers, and the Ad Dharmi movement in Punjab, Dalit literature emerged as a powerful medium of expression.

According to the Dalit narratives written in various forms, it is evident that casteism is still prevalent. When it comes to Dalit literature, poetry and autobiography have received more attention than novels and short stories. Nonetheless, a significant number of short stories have been penned by Dalit writers. Movements like the “Nai Kahani” movement, which focused on the aspirations, desires and pains of the middle class, failed to address the issue of caste. It was only when Dalit writers started writing their own stories that the focus shifted from class to caste. Dalit literature has played a crucial role in social mobilisation against the caste system, presenting real-life situations and first-hand experiences of Dalits. This literature not only challenges the existing social order but also brings to light the ongoing prevalence of caste-based discrimination and the lived realities of marginalised communities. Commenting on what constitutes “Dalit literature,” Sharankumar Limbale in his seminal book, *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* (2004) writes:

Dalit writers believe that Dalit literature is a movement. They see their literature as a vehicle for their pain, sorrow, questions, and problems. But when readers read the works of Dalit writers exclusively as ‘literature,’ the common ground between the writer and the reader is disturbed. (Limbale 105)

Thus, Dalit literature was seen as disturbing rather than pleasing, leading to its marginalisation. However, with the rise of global influence and education, the situation is changing. Dalits are now representing themselves and their struggles through their writings, highlighting scenarios of discrimination and oppression. They depict harsh realities where Dalits are not allowed to enter temples, let alone marry upper-castes.

Endogamy has been a key instrument in maintaining the caste system. It has been a means of keeping the upper-castes “pure” from any defilement which could result from sexual engagement of the upper-caste with the lower-caste. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar advocated for inter-caste marriage as the only way to dismantle the caste hierarchy. In his speech “Annihilation of Caste,” he stated, “The real remedy for breaking Caste is inter-marriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of Caste.” He saw inter-caste marriage as both a protest against discriminatory social structures and a means of breaking down the boundaries of caste. However, this idea has further met with significant challenges and protests. Upper-castes, intent on preserving their perceived purity, vehemently discourage inter-caste marriages by any means possible.

As endogamy constitutes a crucial aspect of the caste system, this paper attempts to explore how far the institution of inter-caste marriage has been successful by studying two Punjabi Dalit short stories: “Awazar” (Disabled) by Sarup Sialvi and “Vithh” (Gap) by Prem Gorkhi. These stories have not yet been translated into English. While the former story deals with caste as an insurmountable hurdle to marriage, the latter is based on how the people who have married outside their caste have to face humiliation and discriminating attitude of their families as well as relatives.

Caste and Identity in “Awazar”: The Impact of Brahmanical Orthodoxy on Personal Relationships

The story “Awazar” begins with a daughter accidentally discovering her mother’s diary opened and reading a passage that recounts a pivotal incident. The diary entry reads, “Who I thought was a saintly man...turned out to

be Debu Bhangi...Debu Majahbi.” This revelation introduces an element of mystery, prompting the reader to wonder about the identity of Debu Bhangi or Debu Majahbi and the nature of his connection to the narrator’s mother. The incident suggests a significant misconception involving Debu and the narrator’s mother, raising questions about their relationship and the implications of discovering that Debu was a *Bhangi* or *Majahbi*, a lower caste man.

What stands out prominently is that the man is identified by his caste, which becomes both the focal point and the source of differentiation between his perceived identity and reality. This revelation underscores how caste emerges as the central issue and problem in the story. The narrator’s mother, upon discovering the true caste of the man, develops a strong aversion towards him. As the story progresses, it becomes evident that the root cause of her animosity towards him is his lower caste status.

Later in the story, the daughter finds an entry in her mother’s diary where she reflects on caste identities: “Those men who use their caste as surnames like *Saini*, *Kashyap*, *Dhiman*, *Gujjar*, *Tank*, etc. are right...they are easily identified as which caste they belong to. However, those men who use names of their villages and cities after their names or adopt pen names like *Arsh*, *Upashak*, *Arshi*, *Deepak*, *Pathak*, *Dardi*, *Hamdard*, etc... are not identified as which caste they belong to?” (my trans.). This passage solidifies that the central theme of the story revolves around caste and caste discrimination.

In the subsequent passage of the story, the narrator recounts informing her mother about her PhD project focused on Punjabi Dalit short stories of the 21st century, in response, her mother scolds her, saying, “You turned out to be that... of that...?” This reaction hints at deep-seated discomfort or disapproval regarding her daughter’s academic pursuit into Dalit literature, possibly indicating underlying biases or societal expectations. Additionally, it is revealed that the daughter is unaware of her father’s identity. She hesitates to confront her mother about the authenticity of the name mentioned in her school records, fearing the implications of questioning her own identity and familiar history.

One day, in her haste to leave for work, the mother inadvertently leaves her diary open. Driven by her curiosity about her father and the mysterious man Debu, the daughter eagerly continues reading. The diary entry is about an incident that occurred on a dark, stormy day when her mother was returning from a temple. She encountered a temple priest who seemed unperturbed by the storm and the lightning. The mother asked him to accompany her to her house and invited him to stay for the night, which led to her becoming pregnant. Later, she found that the priest was from a lower caste, which deeply upset her. Distressed, she visited Dr. Deepak’s clinic, where she had the pregnancy terminated and brought the ‘fetus’ home in a jar.

When the narrator confronts her mother for not telling her about her father, the mother reveals that during the days she went through her treatment, she drew closer to Dr. Deepak. They started living together and she became pregnant with his child. Eventually, she discovered that Deepak was also from Debu Bhangi’s family. She got angry at Deepak for not telling her his caste and ended her relationship with him. She then disclosed to her daughter that Deepak was her father. To end the face-off, the mother said:

Now that I've told you that you are a 'Shudra's' seed grown in a Brahmin's womb, I should also tell you that it is written in *Manu Smriti* that a child born out of the intercourse between a Brahmin woman and Dalit man is called 'Chandal'. And now I will not let a 'Chandal' live in my house. (my trans.)

This story exemplifies the Brahmanical ideology of perceived superiority. The mother who falls for two different men at two different times when she needed them, could not stay with either just because they were from a lower caste. She could engage in intimate relationship with these men, unaware of their caste, but could not marry or remain with them once their caste was revealed. This shows the deeply ingrained prejudices that dictate social and personal relationships, emphasising the pervasive influence of caste discrimination.

In this story, the only barrier between the mother and her relationship with her lovers is her own caste, which, according to *Manu Smriti*, is superior to Debu's or Deepak's caste. She even abandons her own daughter, born from a lower caste man, because she considers the child tainted by lower caste lineage. This illustrates that the rigidity of caste remains as prevalent as it was in Manu's times. Despite being an educated woman with a professional job, the narrator's mother is still entrenched in the Brahmanical attitude that is the root of casteism in India. She makes her see herself as superior, even though she has terminated and killed a child in her womb and rejected another child due to caste considerations. This raises a critical question about the nature of the supposed superiority espoused in *Manu Smriti*. *Manu Smriti* outlines caste-based marriage rules as: "Brahman men can marry Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and even Shudra women but Shudra men can marry only Shudra women."

This statement provides further evidence of how women and lower-caste men and women have been exploited on the basis of religious scriptures that serve as advocates of the Brahmanical orthodoxy. As Tamalapakula states, "the Brahmin/upper-caste woman is confined to caste-endogamous marriage and constrained by the ideology of wifely devotion (pativrata dharma)" (317). Ensuring that no woman from a lower caste becomes pregnant by imposing strict sexual control over her is one way to maintain caste purity. Therefore, it is believed that upper-caste women serve as the "gateways of caste" (Geeta 230).

In patriarchal societies, children born to inter-caste families acquire the legal and social status of the father. This societal structure has influenced upper-caste women's concerns about the respectability of their children in society, shaping their decisions regarding marriage and relationships. This societal pressure is evident in the mother's decision to avoid marrying a lower-caste and her resulting resentment towards her children.

This is why, on December 25, 1927, Babasaheb Ambedkar burned *Manu Smriti* as a symbol of rejecting the religious basis of untouchability. The event took place during the Mahad Satyagraha, highlighting Ambedkar's condemnation of the book that laid the foundation for untouchability. This act of burning *Manu Smriti* symbolises a powerful denunciation of the oppressive caste system and its deep-rooted discrimination. The severity of this institution of religious orthodoxy is evident in the Brahmin mother's treatment of her children in the aforementioned story, where the fathers belonged to lower caste.

Caste and Conflict in “Vithh”: The Socio-economic Dynamics of Inter-caste Marriage

In the second story, “Vithh,” inter-caste marriage emerges as the central theme. Gurbaksh and Harpreet want to marry each other, but caste becomes a formidable barrier between them. Gurbaksh, belonging to a lower caste and without land ownership, faces opposition from Harpreet’s father, a wealthy landowner from a higher caste. Thus, he adamantly refuses to allow his daughter to marry someone outside their caste. Gurbaksh’s own relatives caution him against pursuing this marriage as they knew the potential extremes higher caste families might resort to when it comes to the marriage of their daughters. They won’t allow her to marry anyone from the lower caste. This mutual apprehension surrounding inter-caste marriage vividly shows the influence of religious orthodoxy and caste discrimination.

When Harpreet confides in her mother about her intention to marry Gurbaksh, her father’s reaction is stark:

This marriage shouldn't happen at any cost. Shoot that boy. Give someone some twenty-fifty thousand and get rid of him. Make a deal with Bhaji from Lambda. Are you all dead? Don't worry about the money. Two lacs must have reached to you, more will reach in another nine-ten days. And think about what I said. (my trans.)

The above quotation from the text shows the extreme measures taken against those who violate the strict norms of endogamy in India, often resulting in severe violence against inter-caste couples. Another instance involving Harpreet’s father further highlights this issue: Before his marriage, Harpreet’s father, Jagta, was in love with the daughter of a *Ramdasiye* Master from a neighbouring village. The girl boldly informed her father that she would marry Jagta only or consume poison otherwise. She also conveyed the same ultimatum to Preet’s grandfather. The girl was Bhua's friend, who used to come to their house. Bhua was aware of the entire situation. The next day, Jagta confronted the girl and said how could she think about marriage with him? He expressed his love but insisted that marriage was impossible. The girl remained defiant, declaring that she would not be discarded like trash. She accused Jagta of stealing her honor and vowed to expose him in the village.

Later, the girl vanished without a trace. Her family and the people of the Ad Dharam community united for her but Harpreet’s father bribed the police, who instead arrested the girl’s father, Master. This instance raises the question of power dynamics in social and intimate relations.

In *Against the Madness of Manu*, Sharmila Rege, quoting Ambedkar asserts, “no one’s ‘private sphere’—not even that of God’s—is free from critique” (321). She further states:

Ambedkar not only unraveled the private spheres of Rama and Krishna (Hindu gods), in his text *Riddles of Rama and Krishna*, but also critiqued the power dynamics in their intimate relations. In doing, Ambedkar illustrated how the private spheres of marriage, family, and intimacy are not free from the politics of caste and gender, as Krishna married eight women, of whom the majority belonged to the Kshatriya caste, but lower-caste Yadava women remained his concubines and sexually accessible. (321)

On the contrary, Gurbaksh and Harpreet eventually succeeded in getting married. Despite this, the couple could not visit Harpreet's village for three years. It was only after the birth of their daughter that their relationship was accepted by Harpreet's family. Her father had not seen them during this period and never visited them. When Gurbaksh and Harpreet went to attend her brother's marriage, a relative compared Gurbaksh to a fan and his caste to a brand, which clearly implies that caste is a matter of status. The higher castes see themselves as prestigious brands and their surnames have become a form of advertisement now. This can be seen in the marriage advertisements in the newspapers, where caste and family name are prominently displayed.

Further, Harpreet's mother tries to give her fifty thousand rupees as a gift, which Preeti and Gurbaksh refuse to accept as they already have enough of their own. It is later revealed that Preeti's mother wanted them to buy a car, just like their other son-in-law. Additionally, she suggested to Preeti that Gurbaksh should wear a turban, a symbol of caste. The money represents dowry, an entrenched system among upper-castes that highlights the economic aspects of inter-caste marriages.

In the Indian context, the dowry system has acquired more legitimacy among the middle classes, who promote caste and class endogamy. All these institutions of dowry, endogamy, and religion, pose significant challenges to inter-caste marriage. The story provides enough instances that even an inter-caste marriage is eventually accepted, yet customs and rituals that are caste-specific have to be maintained one way or the other. The higher caste continually reminds the lower caste of their caste, reinforcing the rigid caste hierarchy. Thus, Ambedkar, in his book, *Annihilation of Caste*, argues that:

To agitate for and to organize inter-caste dinners and inter-caste marriages is like forced feeding brought about by artificial means. Make every man and woman free from the thralldom of the Shastras, cleanse their minds of the pernicious notions founded on the Shastras, and he or she will inter-dine and inter-marry, without your telling him or her to do so.

The caste system and endogamy are rooted deeply in the cultures of these communities. These evils need to be eradicated from the hearts and minds of the people; otherwise, not even an inter-caste marriage can bring significant change. Couples like Gurbaksh and Harpreet serve as an example that if you are educated, really educated in the right spirit, and economically independent, you can contribute to the cause Ambedkar advocated for. Economics play a major part in the process of breaking the boundaries based on caste. It was only Gurbaksh and Preeti's economically secure situation that enabled them to stand up for their love.

Both the stories depict caste as a significant barrier to marriage. In the first story, this barrier is not transgressed because the woman is a Brahmin and the men are lower caste Bhangies. The caste system is highly hierarchical, with Brahmins at the top of this hierarchy. Not only does *Manu Smriti* but also *Kama Sutra*, another Hindu religious scripture, advise upper-caste women against marriage or conjugality with lower-caste men. These beliefs of superiority and higher status are deeply embedded in the culture and are passed down from one generation to another. They regulate the behaviour and actions of their subjects, especially women. Upper-caste

families exercise stringent control over women's sexuality. However, despite these pressures, a few upper-caste women, like Harpreet in the second story, do marry outside their caste, unlike the mother of the first story.

Uma Chakravarti's concept of "graded patriarchy," akin to the graded inequalities of caste, imposes varying levels of patriarchal oppression on women. Similarly, sexual purity and feminine honour are also graded according to caste. Brahmin or other upper-caste women are deemed sexually pure, while Dalit women are considered devoid of honour or purity. Jagta's decision of not marrying the girl he claimed to love is regulated by his caste bias. The girl, who insists on marriage, is taken care of through means of power and administrative machinery that favours higher castes. An upper-caste man's cohabitation with any woman does not bring him any defilement and relationships with Dalit or low-caste women can take place outside his domestic sphere or marriage. Gopal Guru states, "Practicing untouchability at home becomes the major source of the [domestic] sovereignty" (55). Thus, the presence of an untouchable woman itself can pollute his domestic sphere. Only an upper-caste woman can guard his domestic sphere and his offspring from defilement. Consequently, Jagta's assertion that he loved the girl but couldn't marry her exemplifies this "graded patriarchy".

Conclusion

Despite the efforts put in by the government and other liberal social organisations, the caste system persists strongly. It is as strong as it ever was, with endogamy continuing to be the preferred form of marriage that upholds caste hierarchy. Nothing has been successful in convincing people to marry outside their caste. However, these wide-ranging social changes seem to have done little to actually dent the institution of caste endogamy, as one glance at any matrimonial website will show. It is evidenced by the low rates of inter-caste marriages in India. These short stories clearly point out the challenges that hinder inter-caste marriage.

To dismantle the caste system, discarding endogamy is the most essential part. The caste system poses a significant obstacle to the social development of humanity as a whole. Babasaheb Ambedkar advocated inter-caste marriage as a means to challenge this system. While achieving this goal is difficult, education and economic independence of both the parties involved can lead to successful relationships and gradually weaken the caste system. One inter-caste marriage is not an achievement in itself but a contribution to a larger goal of social progress.

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