

Existence of caste in adivasi samaj : Through the lens of inter caste marriage

Dhiraj Kumar

M.Phil. Center for Development Practice School of Human Studies, Ambedkar University, Delhi

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to present a part of an ongoing action-research at Gadh-Bansla, a village in Bhanupratappur Block in the Kanker District of Chhattisgarh State, India. The paper asks how the caste system regulates a woman's life-world in marriages in an Adivasi village. I am working with six couples who have married outside their caste. The samaj(the Adivasi village's society) charges a fine on couples who have married outside their caste however the amount charged depends on the caste of the woman. Additionally if the caste of the woman is lower in the hierarchy than that of the husband then she has to face caste discrimination (untouchability, humiliation, etc.) from the husband's family. She is not accepted either by the husband's family or the samaj. The same does not hold true if the caste of the woman is higher in the hierarchy than that of the husband. The child however is accepted in both cases. It is generally accepted that caste society does not operate in Adivasi villages. By using literature on Humiliation studies as well as that on intersectionality of gender and caste I hope to explore this difference in inter-caste marriages, and attempt to show how, even in an Adivasi context, it is the regulation of the rural lower caste woman's life-world that is at the core of the reproduction of hierarchy in the samaj.

Keywords:

Introduction

On the pleasant morning of 11 August 2017, as the residents of Bansla village of Bhanupratappur block in the northern Bastar district Kanker in Chhattisgarh, with the Gond and Halba⁹ tribal communities in majority and also comprising of people belonging to Ganda¹⁰ caste (SC) as well as to Kumhar, Kalaar and Yadav castes (OBC), were gearing up to decide the fate of an adult couple as to whether they needed to be driven off the village and ostracized or be relented upon, around 400 villagers with Halbas from across 7 Panchayats had gathered at around 11 a.m. for this colossal decision that was to be taken in the Mahapanchayat. This couple under trial hails from the Aawaas hamlet of the village who liked and adored each other for several years. On 13 February 2017, the couple tied the knot in Anganwadi¹¹ and after coercion and constant pressure from the society, they married each other constitutionally in a court. The couple belongs to different castes and societies. Pushp, a believer of the Hindu faith hails from Kumhar caste whereas the female, a worshipper of the deity Goddess Danteshwari, belongs to the Halba tribe. This community's mindset closely resembles the Brahmanical mindset as was evident when the Halba tribe demanded the Panch that the couple be banished from the village moments after the Panchayat commenced, but the Panch patiently listened to the both the sides and other people and communities who were present at the gathering and because of legal pressure, decided to let the couple remain in the village leading a normal life. They also said that legal action would be taken against anybody found mistreating the family. This was the final Mahapanchayat that was called for this couple. The Halbas had already carried out 3 panchayats before this, not only this, the society¹² that the couple belonged to had also called for other societal meetings as well wherein the Kumhar community imposed a fine of Rs 50000 on the boy and a fine of Rs 30000 was imposed on the girl's family by her society, they even decided to banish the boy and if he didn't go away, the couple was to be socially boycotted¹³. This social boycott would mean that their community would neither invite them to gatherings during marriages, deaths or other religious functions, nor go to their house till they paid the fine. Any family even mistakenly found to invite them to any function or gathering or visit their house would have a fine imposed on them as well which they would have to pay for violating the code of conduct. For fear of such a boycott, the families of the couple paid their respective

⁹Halba, a Scheduled Tribe, is dominant in this area.

¹⁰Ganda caste, a Scheduled Caste, is discriminated against here.

¹¹ This wedding was organized by the village community where they were given gifts like a bed, gas stove, utensils etc.

¹²Samaaj here means the community of any particular caste or tribe.

¹³ There are many cases where the ostracized couple has converted to Christianity.

finer. A fine of Rs 50000 was not a trivial matter for the family, had it been so, there would have been honour killing instead of the imposition of such a hefty fine. Now the girl is leading a happy married life with her husband and in laws in her husband's society. She is leading a happy life because the social background that she hails from is way more prosperous than the husband's caste in terms of social, economic and political conditions, but despite this, the female no longer remains a Halba, her husband's identity has become her sole identity. The tribal community that she was born into no longer is a part of her identity, this patriarchal male dominant society has ripped her of her tribal identity, even the law has facilitated this. Her offspring will not be known by her caste or society, the child's identity will be dictated by that of his father. When a lower caste female gets married to a male belonging to a higher caste family, not only does the man's family have to pay fine, the girl receives a treatment worse than the slaves, she faces untouchability and discrimination and is disrespected her entire life by her husband's family and society. No matter how hard the slaves work, they are never respected, neither do they receive the wages they deserve despite the fact that their hard work is the sole reason of the master's lavish lifestyle. They don't have an independent existence and similarly neither do the females. There was a love marriage in the village of a Ganda (SC) community girl to a boy belonging to a tribal (Gond) society, the girl has been discriminated her entire life in her own post marriage house by her family. Despite being a part of the family, she hasn't been accepted in the society. Even in the house, she isn't allowed to go anywhere near the worshipping place or to offer prayers or to worship or even consume prasad. The cultural oppression that lower caste females suffer the brunt of is way more inhuman and grievous than any form of economic oppression. Due to caste based disparity, the inaccessibility of lower castes to material resources is more painful than class based oppression, i.e. the collection of surplus using their labour isn't as painful as their inaccessibility to material resources as a result of caste based disparity. When a woman gives birth to a child, then the child becomes a part of that society in every way, it is noticeable that if a higher caste woman is married to a man from a lower caste family, she doesn't face difficulty in living in the household, but what we can't turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to is that the identity of the next generation is the same as that of the father, it's dictated by the father's caste, religion and society, women don't have even a modicum of respect in this patriarchal society, whenever they are married to a male, it doesn't matter whether she belongs to a caste higher than that of the male or even earns more than him, the next generation will be identified by his/her father's identity regardless of everything.

Conversations with women:

An attempt has been made to have conversations on different views on inter-caste marriage with six families in Bansla village. The conversations happened especially with women, young men and young women. The conversations revolved around their experiences within the family and samaj of inter caste marriage and how they are reinforced. According to ShyambatiPadda who is a gond "I do not believe in untouchability. I eat with everyone (irrespective of their caste) but I can do this only outside the village. My samaj (gondsamaj) does not allow me for taking any step on this issue. Even if I try to initiate a conversation on inter-caste or inter-tribe marriage, samaj bluntly tells me that I have forgotten my limits of how to be in the samaj because I am educated". In India, there is no caste in adivasi life worlds but sanskritization and hinduization have started penetrating the adivasisamaj and it is at its peak right now. BhimraoAmbedkar (1993) says that scholars have agreed to the fact that the caste system is either a veneer of morality imposed by policy makers or has prevailed under the norms of society – a society obsessed with social development.

Sanskritization is feeding caste discrimination through strengthening rotten traditions, untouchability, discrimination and inequality. Ambedkar (1993) argues that caste is not just a structural problem but a behavioural problem as well. As much as it is rooted in the behaviour, the structural and principles on which it is based forms the basis for such behaviour. Ambedkar strongly argues that till the time caste system exists inter caste marriages will be a difficult possibility. Ambedkar says that this might not hold true only for India but for the world when Hindus start moving out of India to other parts of the world. BhuvaneshwariDehari, who belongs to Halbatribes argues that Halbasamaj participates the most in discrimination and untouchability. She cites the example of budding liking between juvenile man staying in Badepara of the village who belongs to Halbasamaj and a girl (juvenile) from Schoolpara who belongs to Scheduled caste. Being cautious of the samaj they used to meet each other where people wouldn't spot them. Once, people caught them making love in one of the gardens and they had to flee. The very next day, father of the girl went to the Halba family to talk about marriage of his daughter with their son but Halba family outrightly refused. The reason for the refusal was that the girl belonged to scheduled caste. In response to this, the father of the girl lodged a complaint against the boy in local police station charging the boy of rape.

Both girl and boy were insisting on getting married but the mother of the boy took a staunch stand against this marriage. She was fine with the child being in the prison for years than marrying a lower caste woman. The girl is still waiting for her lover in a hope that they will get married one day. What can be inferred from this is that caste system is penetrating adivasi life worlds and is constantly sanskritizing the adivasi life world. Hitherto we have differentiated castes from tribes but through this incident perhaps we need to take a careful look at this distinction. Adivasis might mark themselves as different from the castes but it is important to take note that when there is a case of caste-tribe marriage, adivasisamaj follows the rules of the caste system stringently. The difference which also needs to be pointed out is that if there would have been any other caste involved in this case apart from Scheduled caste, the adivasi family might have paid the fine and allowed boy and girl to get married.

Initially there was one caste with four categories or classes (*varnas*) viz. Brahmins (or Purohits), Kshatriyas (or warriors), Vaishyas (or merchants), and Shudras (or artisans or labourers). It should be noted that earlier, this stratification was on the basis of 'worth' wherein anyone could change their category. However, the Brahmins at some point in history enclosed themselves so as to not allow others to enter their category; to protect themselves from non-Brahmins in Ambedkar's words. Other classes followed suit and thus categories became rigid which now means that stratification happens on the basis of 'birth'. The result is that today, Shudras or Dalits are the lowest class and women, especially are the most targeted by this kind of system.

References:

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