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Citation for published version:
Chaudhry, S 2019, ''Flexible' caste boundaries: Cross-regional marriage as mixed marriage in rural north India', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 214-228.
https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2018.1536694

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1080/09584935.2018.1536694

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
Contemporary South Asia

Publisher Rights Statement:
This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Contemporary South Asia on 13 November 2018, available online: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09584935.2018.1536694

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Download date: 17. Nov. 2026

‘Flexible’ caste boundaries: cross-regional marriage as mixed marriage in rural north India

Shruti Chaudhry

Abstract

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a village in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, this article focuses on cross-regional marriage (those that cross caste and linguistic boundaries and entail long-distance migration) as mixed marriage. It queries the ‘acceptance’ of women sought beyond traditional boundaries of caste in a context where caste endogamy is the norm and breaches are otherwise not tolerated. It argues that while the caste of the women is overlooked when the alliance is made, their caste does not cease to be a concern in the caste-bound rural communities into which they marry. A discourse of caste, centred on food transactions, derogatory remarks about skin colour and in the refusal to marry the children of cross-regional couples, serves to mark difference and make claims to status. While there has been a decline in certain exclusionary caste practices in the village, a sense of hierarchy is retained.

Keywords: caste, hierarchy, endogamy, cross-regional marriage, inter-caste marriage, discrimination

Introduction

One late afternoon, as I sat chatting with a group of women in the Chamar[1] section of Barampur village,[2] we were interrupted by a middle-aged woman of the same caste. She looked at me and remarked, ‘she cannot be trusted, she won’t say what her caste is’. Being Indian and working in a rural context, I could not escape caste. Caste still ‘matters’ in urban India too (Jodhka and Manor 2017). In the writing on caste, it has been argued that caste has evolved and changed but not dissolved or disappeared (Fuller 1996; Jodhka 2015; Vaid 2012). Change has been observed in the economic domain, with a weakening of traditional systems of patronage, a disassociation between caste and occupation (Gupta 2004; Srinivas 2003) and a decline in the power of the locally dominant castes (Manor 2012). The growing politicisation of caste and increasing dalit assertion has been noted (Michelutti 2007; Pai 2013). There has also been a situational relaxation in some rules of commensality (Mayer 1996).

Several scholars argue that caste can no longer be understood in terms of a hierarchy based on pollution-purity as proposed by Dumont (1970), rather caste tends increasingly to denote ‘difference’ more than ‘hierarchy’ (Gupta 2004; Manor 2012). It is, however, as Jodhka and Manor note, hierarchy between castes that is waning, not caste itself (2017, 17). Caste persists despite growing education, urbanization, industrialization and the affirmative policies of the

Indian State. Corbridge et al. (2013) note that the increased public presence of caste is linked to the rise and consolidation of caste-based identities and identity-based politics. In the arena of marriage, there has hardly been any change in the practice of caste endogamy, particularly in rural areas (Thorat in Jodhka et al. 2012). Even though an increase in number of inter-caste marriages has been observed, they are fairly rare in both rural and urban areas (Vaid 2012). Furthermore, despite its ideological decline, caste-based prejudice and discrimination continue to exist (Jodhka 2015). An increase in incidents of violence against dalits and inequalities with regard to educational attainment and employment remains a reality (Jodhka and Manor 2017; Vaid 2012). Manor (2012) stresses the 'materiality' of caste as crucial in enhancing or undermining people's opportunities and capacities. In discussing change and persistence, Harriss (2012), however, argues against the dominant view on the decline of hierarchies by asserting that while hierarchies may be less powerful than in the past, it does not mean that economic and political dominance has withered away. He emphasises the continuing influence of hierarchical values stating that caste 'entails an ideology that explains and legitimises the material differences of class and power relations'.

In this article, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork (from September 2012-August 2013) in rural Uttar Pradesh to contribute to these discussions on declining hierarchy and the persistence of caste in contemporary India. I do so not by focusing on the political or economic domain, as most studies have, but through a focus on marriage, specifically one form of inter-caste marriage that I term cross-regional marriage (CRM). I will argue that while in rural contexts, caste relations are no longer organised around pollution-purity beliefs, they continue to remain significant in attempts at asserting difference and thereby status. So what are cross-regional marriages?

Since the early 2000s, numerous reports of 'bride buying/trafficking' emerged in the Indian media that provided accounts of a 'flourishing trade in women' brought from the poor states of eastern, north-eastern and southern India and 'sold' as wives to men mainly in India's north and north-western states – Uttar Pradesh (UP), Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan (e.g. Deccan Herald 2007; Hindustan Times 2014; Times of India 2010; Tribune 2003).[3] In the same period, NGOs involved in rescuing 'trafficked' women described the phenomenon as 'akin to medieval sex slavery' (Empower People 2010; Kant and Pandey 2003). In the midst of these sensational accounts, the issue also became the focus of academic work that described these as 'cross-region/regional', 'across-region', 'long-distance' marriages or 'bride-import' (Blanchet 2005; Chaudhry and Mohan 2011; Kaur 2004, 2012; Mishra 2016).

These studies report on brides coming not only from other regions in India but also from Bangladesh and Nepal.

In the academic literature, *four* significant issues highlighted how cross-regional marriages (CRM) represent a 'hitherto undocumented' (Kaur 2004, 2595) type of marriage pattern. *First*, these marriages have been explained as resulting from compulsions at both bride-sending and bride-receiving regions: in the former, the inability to provide a dowry for daughters due to poverty, in the latter, bride shortages due to masculine sex ratios combined with other forms of 'disadvantage'. *Second*, CRMs 'deviate' from north Indian marriage norms: crossing regional and even international boundaries and so entailing very long distance migration for marriage, being inter-caste and sometimes inter-religious. Studies argue that such marriages are 'accepted' in a context where breaches in caste and marriage norms are otherwise not tolerated and often punished with violence. *Third*, these are dowryless marriages: the groom meets the marriage expenses and the go-between who mediates the arrangement often receives a payment. *Fourth*, the spouses in CRMs belong to different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and the incoming bride faces a difficult process of adjustment.

In September 2012, I went to Barampur to investigate the 'new' phenomenon of cross-regional marriage.[4] It stemmed from an interest in interrogating the 'moral panic' surrounding the status of women who became brides in geographically distant and culturally alien rural communities. The research departs from earlier studies on the topic as it adopts a comparative approach. It compares the lived experiences of women in CRM with those in 'regional' marriages (RM) that conform to north Indian marriage norms (caste endogamy, *gotra*/clan and village exogamy within a defined geographical radius, i.e., outside the clan, village and/or district, but usually within the state).[5] In this article, I focus on the inter-caste character of CRM not only to query the 'acceptance' of brides sought beyond traditional boundaries of marriage, but also to provide insights on both the flexibility and rigidity of caste through my research in this north Indian context.

The article is organised as follows. The next section, introduces the methods and research context and outlines the factors that result in CRMs, the negotiation of such marriages and the payments involved. Then I delineate various arguments advanced in the literature to explain the 'acceptability' of CRM in a context where endogamy is the norm. The following three sections discuss food, skin colour and children's marriages to address questions of

discrimination and incorporation. The final section brings these issues together to discuss how CRM, as mixed marriage, contributes to our understanding of caste.

Barampur: the research context

Barampur is located in Baghpat district in the western part of Uttar Pradesh (UP). It is among the largest villages of UP, with 1657 households and a population of almost 10,000. Data collection included a survey of the households in the village. The households were selected through random sampling. Every fourth household was selected from a house list provided by the *panchayat* secretary. Apart from the survey, semi-structured interviews with 38 key informants (19 regional and 19 cross-regional brides) were carried out through repeat visits over the course of the eleven months. Additionally, I conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with a range of informants that allowed me to compare testimonies of the lived experiences of marriage with local commentary on the subject. Observation, informal conversations, gossip and rumour served as additional sources of information.

Studies note that CRMs are occurring among all castes (Kaur 2012; Mishra 2016). Barampur has twenty-two caste groups, seventeen Hindu and five Muslim. Men of five castes – three Hindu (Jat, Chamar, Kumhar), and two Muslim (Teli and Lohar) had brought cross-regional brides (CRB). Jats are the dominant caste of the village, both numerically and in terms of landownership. Educational levels and employment in government-sector jobs is much higher among the Jats than in other castes. Chamars (traditionally leather-workers) are the largest Dalit caste of UP and are numerically the second largest caste in the village. Kumhar (traditionally potters), Teli (traditionally oil pressers) and Lohar (traditionally ironsmiths) are Other Backward Classes (OBCs). A large proportion of Chamar, Teli and Kumhar households are engaged in casual work (in brick kilns, as agricultural labourers etc.). Lohars are the largest Muslim caste in Barampur and are economically better-off as compared to the other Muslim castes of the village.

Highly masculine sex ratios, attributed to pronounced son preference and 'daughter aversion' (John et al. 2009), have existed historically in western UP. This is commonly understood as providing the explanation for cross-regional marriages. Elsewhere, I have argued that while demographic factors provide the context, the contemporary inability of some men to marry needs to be linked to other forms of disadvantage resulting largely from wider changes in the political economy (author 2018). Among the Jats, marginal landownership, lack of education, unemployment or lack of salaried employment were crucial. For Chamar and Kumhar men,

informal sector work/seasonal labour migration adversely affected their marriageability. Individual characteristics (such as physical disability, 'older' age or prior marital status, 'flawed' reputation due to gambling, alcoholism, drugs etc.) presented additional challenges (see also Kaur 2004). CRMs were rare amongst the Muslim castes and only widowed or divorced men seeking second marriages faced difficulties.

The CRBs interviewed had migrated for marriage from thirteen districts of five states – Assam, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar (in the east/north-east) and Maharashtra (in the west). The women said they had become CRBs because of poverty and the possibility of escaping dowry, as well as difficult family situations or insecure dependence on family members, a previous marriage, physical disability or changing economic circumstances of the natal family (fathers passing away or natural calamities, for instance). Most CRMs were mediated by other CRBs already married in Barampur or other parts of UP, or by the husbands of these brides. Some were arranged by other intermediaries, such as shopkeepers, army men, a 'relative' or 'acquaintance'. Exceptionally, women had been 'deceived' and 'coerced' into marriage either by someone known to them or by professional suppliers of brides.

The grooms in CRM had forgone the dowry that had become customary in Barampur and met other wedding expenses too. The payments varied ranging from only travel-fare or expenses paid to the go-between, a fee (brokerage) for negotiating the marriage, or a payment for expenses or in exchange for a bride to the parents, or a combination of these. Because the grooms were believed to have incurred expenses instead of the bride's family, villagers spoke of CRMs as cases of bride-buying.[6] Generally, the grooms travelled to the brides' native states for the marriage. The wedding in a distant place, without legitimation by essential rituals and witnessing by the community, also contributed to the belief that CRMs were cases of bride-buying and not 'proper' marriages.

Informants told me about brides who had been in the village since the early 1960s and said that brides have been arriving ever since, the newest bride having arrived from Jharkhand just two weeks before I started fieldwork. There was no local term to describe CRM but in conversation the brides were referred to as *bāhar se/kī* (from outside), *dur kī* (from faraway), *purabnī* (from the east), *Bihārī* (from Bihar) or *mol kī* (bought wife).

An 'endogamy paradox': explaining inter-caste cross-regional marriage

For Davis, endogamous marriage is at the heart of the caste order (1941, 380). Other scholars too see endogamy as the defining feature of caste (Dumont 1970; Ghurye 1932). Studies on

gender and caste furthered our understanding of how women's bodies and sexuality are controlled for the reproduction of caste and patriarchy (Chakravarti 2003; Dube 2003; Rege 2003). As a form of 'group closure' (Kalmijn 1998, 396), endogamy enables a caste group to reproduce itself in terms of status and control over property and to maintain the 'purity of blood' by preventing 'outsiders' from intruding into the group. Some boundary crossing is permitted in the form of hypergamous marriage ('marrying up'). Yet this does not usually contravene endogamy (Dumont 1970, 159) as it generally occurs between sub-castes (Davis 1941), ranked clans (Parry 1979), or with economic status and *gotra* (clan) operating as conflicting components of hypergamy within the caste (Khare 1960).

Some studies on urban contexts, note the weakening of collective sanctions against inter-caste unions (De Neve 2016: Fruzzetti 2013). In rural north India, however, caste endogamous marriages remain the norm. Inter-caste marriages/elopements lacking parental sanction, and also intra-*gotra*/clan or within village unions are often punished with violence termed 'honour' killings (Chakravarti 2003; Chowdhry 2007; Kaur 2010). As women are regarded as 'gateways' – literally points of entrance into the caste system (Das 1976, 135), alliances that evoke the most violent responses are those between upper caste women and Dalit men. Yet lower castes are also opposed to inter-caste marriages and uphold the norm of endogamy (Chowdhry 2007).

In Barampur too, the 'rules' of marriage were enforced and transgressions punished. Rampal (87, Jat) told me about an intra-village elopement among the Jats in the early 1990s.

> The faces of the fathers of the couple were blackened and they were made to sit on donkeys and taken around the village [common means of public shaming]. The girl was later brought back and married off to someone else.

During my fieldwork, I heard rumours about a few young women in inter-caste relationships who had 'committed suicide' or 'died of an illness' under unexplained circumstances. Babli (19, Chamar) commented on one case in 2009: 'It is known to everyone in the village that the girl was murdered by her father'. While the fear of punishment served to enforce conformity, the desire for a 'choice' or 'love' marriage was expressed by some of my younger informants. I also heard of several pre-marital relationships in the village within or across castes that I was told, would not culminate in marriage. Babli explained that if she asserted 'choice' it would result in the withdrawal of parental support post-marriage.[7] If breaches in marriage

norms are not tolerated, how are individuals able to navigate their way through practices (here CRM) that are not normally sanctioned by communities?

Abraham describes the coexistence of 'honour' killings and CRM as an 'endogamy paradox' (2014, 57), whilst Chowdhry attributes the 'widespread approval' of such unions to 'necessity' (2011, 255). Writing on CRM in Haryana, Kaur (2004, 2602) explains:

> What possibly explains the differential acceptability is 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. 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.

Mishra, also writing on Haryana, explains that as the bride's family belong to a distant region and only the groom and a few others visit her native village, so her caste identity can be easily concealed. When questioned, men say their wife belongs to the same caste, although the caste name is different in her native state (2016, 231). Similarly, Abraham maintains that the caste identity of CRBs can remain 'unknown and vague' because they are imported from outside the local region (2014, 63). Evidence from Barampur supports these arguments and provide some additional insights.

Jagbiri (71, Kumhar RB) said that CRMs were not always tolerated. Previously, a CRM resulted in outcasting ('*huqqā pānī bandh*'), with caste members refusing to share the *huqqā* (smoking pipe) or accept water from them.[8] She explained that *majbūrī* (necessity) made men seek wives from outside, and gradually such marriages became acceptable as more brides arrived. Some informants remarked that the caste of CRBs was insignificant because 'a woman has no caste of her own': after marriage she becomes a member of her husband's caste group. Mahipal, (68, Jat) told me: 'The Jat community is like the river Ganges: whoever falls into it also becomes Jat' (cf. Chowdhry 2007a, 212 who cites a similar rationalisation of inter-caste marriages during the colonial period in Haryana-Punjab). These sayings make evident the gendered character of caste membership and imply that endogamy could be breached by dominant/upper caste men but not by Jat women. Further, this rationale was not extended to inter-caste regional marriages (see also Mishra 2016).

CRBs were told to say that they belonged to their husbands' castes or to a higher caste rather than reveal their castes to others. Ashok (39, Jat) explained: 'These women are *dūr kī* (from

far away) so it is easier to keep quiet because we know that their caste is different but we cannot say anything for certain'. Nevertheless, villagers were aware of attempts to conceal the caste of CRBs. Kavita (41, Jat RB) commented:

> You can tell that the caste of these women is different because everyone here knows: where are there Jats in Bengal? Nobody asks these women what their caste is, because when they are asked they say they are Sonar or Brahmin or Rajput [upper castes].

Kavita suggests not only that CRBs cannot possibly be upper caste but also alludes to a widespread assumption in Barampur that all CRBs belonged to *nīchī jātīs* (lower castes). Judging by what CRBs said their fathers' castes were, however, some were in inter-caste marriages and were not Dalit/low caste. Some were higher caste than their husbands and some were Muslim prior to their marriage to Hindu men (see also Blanchet 2005 and Kaur 2012 on the marriage of Bangladeshi Muslim women to Hindu men in eastern UP). Ten of the 19 CRBs interviewed admitted to being in inter-caste marriages and two brides married to Hindu men said that their fathers were Muslim. Renuka (33, CRB), for instance, said that her father's caste was *nai* (barber/non-Dalit) and not Chamar (her husband's caste). She said the go-between had lied to her parents about her husband's caste. Brijpal (55, Kumhar), husband of Kalawati (40, CRB) said his wife was Thakur/Rajput (upper caste), but Kalawati told me:

> Here they do not know what the Karamkar caste is. Karamkars are Lohars. Here Lohars are Muslims but in Assam they are Hindus. Since I have been here, I have been saying that my caste is Kumhar. You have to hide your caste; there is nothing you can do.

I could not establish if CRBs in fact belonged to the castes that they said they did. Clearly, though, the caste status of CRBs was overlooked when alliances were made. In her observation of an interaction between prospective grooms and go-betweens in eastern UP, Blanchet similarly noted that no one asked questions about the religion and caste of the women (2005, 320). Kaur also found that men were 'rarely particular about the caste of the bride', beyond asking for a bride of a 'clean caste' if they themselves were not Dalit (2012, 84). Does caste then cease to concern the rural communities into which CRBs marry?

In her work on CRM in Haryana, Mishra did not find the CRBs' caste status to be 'contentious in itself', although important because marriage into another caste meant accommodating to new caste practices. She noted that caste-based discrimination against the incoming bride was rare and that Haryanavi society had accepted the import of brides as a

'normal' phenomenon (2016, 232-34). On first glance, Barampur appears to be similar. CRBs were accorded the status of wives and mothers. Their children were recognised as legitimate, and sons inherited their fathers' property just like sons of RBs. Moreover, as I discuss elsewhere, the cross-regional status of brides was not of primary significance in, for instance, everyday decisions about work, having and raising children, their relationships with other women and so on (author 2016). Before arriving in the village, CRBs did not undergo purificatory rituals due to their unknown caste status, unlike in neighbouring Bijnor district in the 1980s and 90s (Jeffery and Jeffery 1996, 240).

Here I wish neither to generalise the experience of all brides nor argue for 'widespread intolerance', as some have (Kukreja and Kumar 2013, 2, 32; Kukreja 2018; see also Mukherjee 2013). Rather, I seek to problematize the view that the uncertain/differential caste status of CRBs is entirely irrelevant in the caste-bound rural communities into which they marry. There are two issues that need consideration: *First*, as discussed earlier, villagers attempted to rationalise the 'acceptance' of CRM. At the same time, there were denials or attempts at distancing from the practice. For instance, the village headman, a Jat, told me: 'Among the Jats, there are no brides from outside. You will only find them among the lower castes … Jat men don't bring brides from outside'. Santosh (60, Jat RB) remarked, 'I would not let such a woman enter the house. I would rather leave my son unmarried'. Jats claimed to prefer bachelorhood over CRM, which were spoken of as *burra* (bad) and believed to have an adverse effect on a family's honour because they entailed 'buying' and crossed caste boundaries. [9] The difficulties I encountered in accessing CRBs, especially among the Jats, also suggests discomfort around these marriages.

Jats were not alone in such attempts at distancing. Satender (55, Chamar), told me: 'a bride from outside is less valued because a local woman will know our language, *rahan-sahan* (way of life) … there the *riti riwaj* (customs) are different'. Satender is referring to cultural and linguistic differences between north India and the brides' native states, but his comment could also be about caste difference, because caste is often spoken about in terms of 'cultural difference' and 'way of life' (Mayer 1996, 59-60; Fuller 1996, 12).

Second, in Barampur there was a discourse on caste that centred on idioms of purity that were expressed through food transactions, derogatory remarks about skin colour, and in the reluctance to accept children of cross-regional couples in marriage. In this article, I discuss this second issue in detail, drawing largely on conversations with informants other than the

CRBs themselves. I focus on the discourse around these marriages for an understanding of caste because, as Sharma notes, 'there is no enduring content to the institution of caste. It is whatever people say it is or do in its name at any one time' (1999, 75). I begin by discussing how interactions involving food are used in social distancing.

Food

Appadurai writes, food can serve 'two diametrically opposed semiotic functions: it can either homogenize the actors who transact in it, or it can serve to heterogenize them' (1981, 494). An older body of literature (Dumont 1970; Kolenda 1992; Marriott 1968; Mayer 1956) has addressed the role of rules of commensality (how food is prepared, served, consumed and with whom it is shared) in ordering relations among castes. Women's caste is relevant here not only because the domestic habits of each caste are different (Mayer 1996: 60) but also as Dube (2003, 228-30) explains:

> The task of safeguarding food, averting danger, and in a broad sense attending to the grammatical rules which govern the relational idiom of food, falls upon women…Acceptance of food cooked by a woman married into a family of another caste involves complex judgements regarding the differences in the ritual quality of foods in terms of their purity and vulnerability to pollution.

This statement contextualises the supposed refusal to consume food prepared by CRBs of uncertain caste statuses. Rampal (87, Jat) told me: 'We do not treat a woman who comes *bāhar se* differently, but we do not accept food cooked by her. If she comes and gives us some food, we will take it from her and later give it to the cattle to eat'. Sudeshna (23, Kumhar RB) the daughter-in-law of Chhaya, (55, CRB) explained:

> People differentiate with women who come *bāhar se* because in their native states they ate eggs, meat and fish. When I got married, my relatives would say, 'your mother-in-law is from there, she will eat fish and rice everyday'. Here we do not even touch eggs. For this reason, I do not tell anyone that she is *bāhar kī*. I do not feel bad that she is from there. I even eat food cooked by her. She has been here for so many years yet there are some people who do not accept food from women like her because they think it is not clean.

Sudeshna attributes the refusal to accept food to non-vegetarianism and its associated uncleanliness and mentions that she belongs to a caste that is strictly vegetarian. Talk of

vegetarianism, here is, to quote Pandian, 'caste by other means' (2002, 1735). Kolenda writes: '…a vegetarian diet characterizes the purer castes. There are, furthermore, degrees of non-vegetarianism. It is especially defiling to eat the meat of the sacred cow. The next worst is eating pork, then mutton, then chicken, then fish, then eggs' (1992, 80). In Barampur, some Jat men had begun consuming non-vegetarian food, and this was explained primarily in terms of out-migration for work. Most Jats and all Kumhars, unlike Chamars and Muslims, were vegetarian however. Western UP has a history of Jat farmers employing in-migrant *Bihārī* labourers. During my fieldwork, I heard various accounts that stereotyped migrants from Bihar, including 'they eat anything, even rats'. This may have contributed to assumptions about the eating habits of CRBs whom villagers stereotyped as *Bihārī* or 'from the side of Bihar'. Jat informants made similar remarks about Chamars: 'They eat not only chicken but also pork and beef', food practices associated with the 'lower unclean castes' because they entail the ingestion of 'pollutants'.

Dalit and non-dalit castes alike expressed a refusal of food from the 'lower' caste CRBs. My facilitator, a Chamar, was also perplexed that I accepted food at Valmiki households,[10] something he said Chamars would not do. Deliege (1992) made a similar observation about two Dalit castes in a South Indian village: Pallars claimed that they would not accept food or water from the Paraiyars, even though they did. Caution is needed, then, as Deliege notes, to differentiate between people's statements and their practices.[11] Only two CRBs said their husbands' relatives had refused to accept food cooked by them when they first arrived over two decades ago. During my fieldwork, I never witnessed anyone refusing food from a CRB, just as I had not seen a Chamar refusing food from a Valmiki. What I did observe, was on several occasions when I visited Kalawati, (40, Kumhar CRB), Jagbiri (71, Kumhar RB) was eating and drinking tea there. Urmila (32, Jat RB) told me that she met Varsha, (28, Jat CRB), every Tuesday as they fasted, cooked and visited the village temple together.

In Barampur, a weakening of certain social practices of caste was evident in other domains too, including entry into upper caste houses and access to common village spaces, also noted by other village studies (Mayer 1996; Jodhka 2015; Still 2013). In light of the relaxation in exclusionary practices within the village, the refusal (in theory at least) to accept food from CRBs may be read as an attempt at social distancing and as denoting 'aspirations toward higher status' (Appadurai 1981, 495).

Skin colour

Like food, villagers used comments about skin colour to mark difference and attribute lower caste status to CRBs. Savita (late 20s, CRB married to a Jat) said she had never faced discrimination since arriving in Barampur in the mid-2000s. Yet her neighbour, Kajri (35, Jat RB) told me about Savita:

> She is not beautiful at all. *Bihārī* women are *kālī* [literally black, used to describe dark skin]. He [her husband] should have chosen a better woman – a woman who looked nice standing beside him. She looks like a Chamar woman. Even when she bathes, it makes no difference. Marriage should be within the caste. Only a Jat is fit for a Jat…

Similarly, when I asked a Jat government appointed health worker about CRBs, she asserted: 'you will be able to identify them without any difficulty: they look like black dogs'. 'Chamar' and 'dog' are both terms of abuse. 'Dog' is often used for Dalits: although couched in the language of colour, the caste connotations were evident in the above quotes. As Doniger (2014) points out, 'for caste-minded Hindus, dogs are as unclean as pigs are to orthodox Jews and Muslims… people who touch human waste are often referred to as pigs and dogs'. There is wide variation in skin tone across India. Most of my CRB informants were indeed visibly darker than local UP women, and five said they had been derided to their face for having dark skin by their husband's relatives or other women in the village.

Sudeshna (the daughter-in-law of a CRB) told me: 'I feel bad when people from my natal village tell me that my husband is so *kālā* [literally black]. When they see him, they ask me if my mother-in-law is from West Bengal'. Here the offspring of the CRM is spoken off as bearing 'an external mark of his mother's origin' (Davis 1941, 387). In Haryana, Chowdhry observed anxieties being expressed through the oft-repeated phrase '*Haryana kī nasal badal jāgī*' [Haryana's racial stock will go bad or change] (2011, 257).

An association of status and privilege with white or light skin has been noted in many parts of the world (cf. Dixon and Telles 2017). In Barampur too, villagers spoke of lower castes as having dark skin. On one occasion a Jat man told me: 'I saw you once with a Chamar woman and I thought to myself, she could not possibly be a *Chamārī*, because you are not *kālī*, to be a Chamar woman'. Sarla (47, Jat RB) told me: 'Usually, Chamars are *kālā* but you will notice that some Chamars have lighter skin than others. These are children of Chamar women and Jat men'. The exceptions to dark-skinned Dalits and light-skinned upper castes cast doubts on racially-based theories of caste (Gorringe and Rafanell 2007, 104; Still 2014, 69), yet the

association between colour and caste was strongly made in Barampur. This explains the comparison that Kajri (RB above) made between Savita (CRB) and Chamar women. Further, in saying 'even when she bathes, it makes no difference', Kajri was alluding to Savita's innate uncleanliness. In her work in a south Indian village, Still observed that negative attitudes towards Dalits were often articulated in terms of dirt: concerns about germs, filth and hygiene coincided with concerns about ritual pollution, and dirt was one idiom through which distance was expressed (2013, 74). A similar attempt at distancing is evident in the above quote. For those like Kajri, dirtiness became a way to assert that 'I am not casteist. I am only concerned about hygiene'. Moreover, in saying that 'only a Jat is fit for a Jat', what is suggested is that such brides are 'matter out of place' (Douglas 2002, 44-45) as they contravene the 'order' or 'cherished classifications' (of caste).

In India, colour consciousness becomes prominent in the matchmaking process.[12] The desirability of light or fair skin is gendered: it is much more significant for women to be fair than men, as studies on matrimonial advertisements have noted (Jha and Adelman 2009). In Barampur, fair skin was highly desired in new and potential brides. On one occasion, Sakeena (43, Teli RB) asked me to suggest a skin lightening cream for her oldest daughter so that they would be able to attract a marriage proposal for her.[13] Her daughter had been 'rejected' by one potential groom's father on grounds of her dark skin. Ritu (25, Jat RB) said that her mother-in-law favoured her over the other daughters-in-law because of her fair skin. Two words were generally used in the village when speaking about skin tone – *bhūrī* (for light skin) and *sāwlī* (for dark skin). I never heard the latter applied to CRBs: people used *kālī* (black) instead, also used for Dalits. There existed a 'colour hierarchy' (Dixon and Telles 2017, 418) with cross-regional brides and dalits being at the bottom of this hierarchy. Informants did not say that CRBs looked different because they had different facial features (which most brides, particularly from Assam and West Bengal did). Rather, they adopted the familiar idiom of colour to accentuate difference. While for regional brides, colour was significant in assessing beauty and attractiveness, for cross-regional brides (as for Dalits) it was seen as an indicator of caste.

Children of inter-caste cross-regional unions

In addition to food transactions and skin colour, villagers expressed concerns about the uncertain caste status of CRBs in the refusal to arrange marriages with the children of cross-regional couples. Davis considered that the very basis of the caste order would be undermined if the offspring of intermarriages were given their fathers' legal status (1941, 389). This highlights why the placement of children of inter-caste unions is problematic. Scholars argue that irrespective of the system of descent, caste status is bilateral (Dube 2003, 33; Yalman 1963, 40) and that the distance separating the castes of the spouses is crucial in determining the caste status of the offsprings (Tambiah 1973, 221-22). In Barampur, there was a 'patrilineal bias' (Parry 1979, 131) in the attribution of caste status to the children of inter-caste unions. Children of cross-regional couples were incorporated into their fathers' caste, with the 'differential' caste of their cross-regional mothers having no bearing on this. Barring a few exceptions, CRBs said their children had never faced any discrimination. Some believed that children from a CRB's previous marriage in her native state might face discrimination, but not those born to men in Barampur.[14] Some of the children of cross-regional couples mentioned being called the children of *Bihari* mothers or bought wives during a fight.[15] Most informants felt that the mothers' caste status always emerged as an issue in conversations about the marriages of children of cross-regional unions.

In her study in eastern UP, Blanchet found that children of CRM were married into similarly constituted families, creating a kind of sub-caste (2005, 321). Likewise, Kaur notes concerns about the marriage prospects of children of cross-regional/border couples: parents in such marriages felt that they would have to arrange their sons' marriages in families of similar couples, or go back to the mother's community to look for a match (2012, 86). Earlier, Kaur postulated that the marriage prospects of daughters and sons of CRB may differ: whilst a daughter's mixed-caste status may be ignored when arranging a marriage, this might not be so for a son (2004, 2603).

In Barampur, of the nineteen CRBs interviewed, nine had married children. The children had all married within the father's caste and some had married children of other CRBs. As noted by earlier studies, the commonly-held opinion was that difficulties arose in marrying sons but not daughters. In a context of masculine sex ratios and bride shortages, sons had to fulfil criteria of education and employment. Daughters were probably easier to marry as they were not expected to be breadwinners, yet this was not without problems. Abdul (30, Lohar) told me about Faiza (late 40s, CRB) in his extended family:

> These kinds of marriages are considered *nēchī* [lower] because the woman is a *Bihāran*…Her elder daughter is married to a man who has no source of income and he was married previously. Problems will also arise in the marriage of her other daughters because only god knows what her caste is.

Informants always stressed the 'ineligibility' (lack of employment, previous marriage etc.) and hence un-marriageability of the sons-in-law of CRBs. Similarly, villagers highlighted the 'ineligibility' of women in relation to the marriage of sons of CRBs. Satender (55, Chamar), for instance, commented:

> The sons of a woman who is *bāhar kī* will get married but only into families of lower status. Those from a good family will not agree to give their daughter to the son of a *Bihāran*. Their daughters-in-law will come from poor families and will be illiterate. Sheela's *bahū* is illiterate and so is Omvati's [both CRBs].

Again we need to be cautious in interpreting such assertions. Neither Sheela's nor Omvati's daughters-in-law was illiterate. Also, Omvati's daughter-in-law said that she learnt of her mother-in-law's cross-regional status only after her wedding. The commonly-held opinion, however, was that children of CRBs would marry only into low status families and they would have no choice but to settle for lower forms of marriage such as exchange marriage.[16] In saying this, they did not acknowledge that exchange marriage was or had become common among Chamars and Kumhars and the children of RBs were also married in exchange. Munesh (38, Kumhar RB) remarked: 'Why would I give my daughter in marriage to a man whose mother is a *Bihāran*?' Whilst Munesh suggests that this was impossible, there were nevertheless RBs whose daughters were married to sons of CRBs. Moreover, Munesh herself had come to Barampur in exchange for the daughter of a CRB.

Crucially, the fathers of these men had themselves failed to have a regional marriage because of their own 'ineligibility' (poverty, low levels of education etc.). It is, then, vital to include the class position of the husbands of CRBs when exploring the marriage prospects of children of such unions. The non-marriageability of sons may be (at least partially) explained in terms of the intergenerational perpetuation of inequality.

Some informants suggested that even 'eligibility' could not offset the disadvantage of a cross-regional mother. Rampal (87, Jat) said:

> I was considering a professor as a potential spouse for my daughter. The marriage had been fixed. The matchmaker did not reveal to us that the man's paternal grandmother was *Bihārī*. I found out about this from elsewhere while I was making enquiries. I then broke the engagement. We did not know what her caste was.

Kavita (41, Jat RB), however, held a different opinion and told me about the son of a CRB who had faced no difficulties in getting married because he had fulfilled the desired criteria for marriage (salaried employment).

> If a Jat family is well off, they can also get the daughter of a poor Jat family in marriage. The *Bihārī* status of the mother or grandmother will then not be an issue. The only reason why the son of a *Bihārī* woman will not get married is if he is poor and unemployed and not because his mother is *Bihārī*.

In her work in Haryana, Mishra found that the children of cross-regional couples denied experiencing any difficulties because of their mothers' caste status. Sons attributed problems they faced to factors such as little education, not having a stable source of income, alcoholism and so on. Misha argues that 'these problems are shared by the vast majority of young unmarried males in Haryana and have nothing to do with the caste status of the mother' (2016, 233). I agree with her point that young men who cannot meet criteria of eligibility may be unable to marry (for more on this, see author 2018). Yet for Barampur, it is difficult to say with certainty if villagers are correct in their view that a man's mother's cross-regional origins is the main reason why he encounters difficulties in marriage, or whether this is merely an additional consideration that compounds his failure to fulfil the desired criteria of eligibility that are just as crucial for the children of regional brides. Nevertheless, a mother's cross-regional origins are certainly spoken of as a hindrance and provides discursive grounds for rejecting a marriage proposal, albeit entangled with several other issues.

I now move on to discuss how this ethnographic study of cross-regional marriage aids our understanding of caste.

Discussion and conclusion

In a context where transgressions in the 'norms' of marriage are otherwise not tolerated, the 'acceptance' of unions sought beyond the boundaries of caste raises questions about the flexibility of caste and its reproduction. Palriwala and Kaur rightly point out that 'officialising ideologies' (cf. Bourdieu 1977) may mask diversity and change (2014, 5). The evidence from

Barampur suggests a gap between the actual and ideal at two levels: *first*, the norms of marriage and their infringement in practice and *second*, a discourse of caste that does not map onto local dynamics.

On the first point, Abraham argues that endogamy is 'contingent' (2014, 58) and she uses several examples to illustrate 'shifts in the enforcement of endogamy' over time. Writing on the Thiyyas of north Kerala, for instance, she notes that Thiyya women who entered non-endogamous relationships with British men during the colonial period did not initially face sanctions. Towards the end of the 19th century, however, this changed with the growth of the social reform movement and women and their children who bore the 'white connection' were excommunicated. This depended largely on the class status of the men with whom they established relationships, however. In the 1920s and 30s, these women were re-incorporated into the caste and subsequently several intermarriages were known to have taken place, although the old stigma continued to be evoked sometimes. Abraham argues that the enforcement of endogamy was not about 'purity of blood' and was reproduced less as a value in itself and more as an ideal intimately tied to power and forms of social status (2014, 64).

Likewise, for north India, Chowdhry notes that inter-caste marriages were not the norm in Punjab-Haryana during the colonial period yet were not uncommon. Jats in particular married lower caste women. Undue importance was not attached to caste purity when breached by a man and 'a faint pretence was kept that the girl was of his caste and an equally faint acceptance followed' (2007a, 211). This changed, however, when property and desire for upward mobility emerged as concerns. In the post-colonial period, transgressions of caste norms became unacceptable with inter-caste marriages punished through violence.

That caste has been flexible in different contexts and points of time suggests that deviation from the endogamy norm is permitted insofar as it does not challenge local status hierarchies and the social order remains intact, as in the case of cross-regional alliances. The distance between the incoming CRBs' natal and marital homes helps maintain ambiguity and hence silence regarding their caste statuses, and makes possible their accommodation in receiving communities. Within the regional context, though, this has not resulted in the transformation of structures of power and dominance or a weakening of endogamy. On the contrary, as Kaur (2010) also notes for Haryana and UP, the import of brides from other states has been accompanied by a tightening of control over local women and increased sanctions against

self-arranged marriages. Thus, the enforcement of endogamy continues to ensure the persistence of caste in rural north India.

On the second point, caste difference may be overlooked when a cross-regional alliance is made (owing to necessity), but I argue that the unknown caste status of CRBs does not cease to concern the caste communities into which CRBs marry. In Barampur, assumptions that all CRBs belong to low/Dalit castes reflect a prevailing discourse of caste discrimination. As discussed earlier, several scholars have argued that caste as a hierarchical system has declined. For instance, Corbridge et al. write: 'Castes are arranged "horizontally" – separated from each other on the basis of their different identities and myths – rather than "vertically" along the lines of purity and pollution' (2013, 251). In such a view, caste has changed from hierarchy to identity/difference. Manor asserts that this 'change is not as widely recognized as it should be, but abundant evidence from diverse regions plainly indicates that it has been occurring – unevenly, but widely enough to be a national trend' (2012, 14). Further, Fuller suggests that the language used to talk about caste has changed. He writes, 'because people cannot openly speak of castes as unequal, they describe them as different' (1996, 13; see also Still 2013). What do the data from Barampur suggest?

In the village, people expressed separation/difference through the language of purity-pollution. Ideas of hierarchy formed the basis of prejudice and discrimination. To quote Marriott and Inden, 'right eating, right marriage, and other right exchanges and actions' (1977, 233) were at the core of it. People in Barampur said they refused to accept food or marry the children of CRBs whose skin colour served as a proxy for caste. Non-Dalit castes made similar remarks about Dalits in the village. Interestingly, moreover, Dalits in Barampur adopted the same vocabulary of caste-based discrimination to distance themselves from CRBs. As Gupta notes, 'as castes always value themselves highly, they must, as a consequence, hierarchise others, however idiosyncratic such formulations may appear to be' (2004, ix). At the same time, I have demonstrated that the aforementioned seem to have little to do with actual concerns around purity. Rather people use purity and pollution beliefs to define and assert separation and thereby make claims to superior status. Status aspirations then are played out in the discursive domain. The disjunction between attitudes and practices can be thus understood, as Harriss (2012) argues, in terms of 'the declining power of caste hierarchies' but the 'continuing significance of hierarchical values'. Returning to the question of why caste persists, I conclude that apart from class inequalities and difficulties in accessing material mobility and opportunities, attitudes of discrimination, remain part of the 'habitus'

(Bourdieu 1977) and are more resistant to change. Exclusionary caste practices may decline, but a sense of hierarchy and difference is retained.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Hugo Gorringe for discussion and his very useful comments on this paper. Thanks too to Rajni Palriwala for her specific comments that helped clarify individual points. An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the South Asia Forum Lecture Series at ISEK, University of Zurich. I would like to thank Clémence Jullien and the other participants for their questions and suggestions.

Notes

[1] Chamars are Dalits (ex-untouchables) designated Scheduled Castes in the Indian Constitution. The Indian Constitution entitles Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes to reservation in government employment and educational institutions.

[2] Barampur is a pseudonym and the names of all informants have been changed.

[3] Cross-regional marriages are much more widespread than has been assumed and are also occurring in south India. See Srinivasan (2017) on the marriage of men from Tamil Nadu with Kerala women and Mazumdar et al. (2013) on 'Mysore marriages' (Muslim women from Kerala and grooms from Mysore).

[4] Earlier studies document the presence of such brides in northern India (e.g. Darling 1977; Raheja 1988; Berreman 1972). Nevertheless, these marriages are no longer exceptional with many more men than before seeking brides from other states.

[5] According to some earlier village studies, marriages were generally arranged within a 25 km radius (Palriwala and Uberoi 2008). Some upper castes (such Brahmins and Rajputs), however, tended to marry over longer distances. More recent studies point to an expansion of marriage distance and an increase in village exogamous marriages (Mazumdar et al. 2013). According to my village survey, the marriage distance for women in regional marriages varied from 3-154 kilometers. Regional marriages may be arranged between families in contiguous states. For instance, some brides had moved to Barampur from their natal villages in Haryana. These parentally arranged marriages conformed to community norms of marriage. Western UP and Haryana are contiguous and are linguistically and culturally similar, although there might be differences in dialect, work patterns etc.

[6] A marriage without a dowry, the honourable form of marriage payment, is considered to negate the spirit of a *kanyādān* marriage – 'gift of a maiden' (Raheja 1988, 236) – according to which the gift of the daughter is to be accompanied by material gifts (Dumont 1970, 117). This is the upper caste/Brahmanical and textual view and in this perspective the idea of price or sale and not gift is associated with all marriage payments made to the parents of the bride by the groom. It is important to note that the spread of dowry practices across social groups, including many who practised brideprice in the past is relatively recent. Thus, some groups may be going back to a practice they had followed just a few decades ago.

[7] De Neve (2016) made a similar observation in his work in urban Tamil Nadu. He found that while 'love marriages' that transgress caste and religious boundaries have become increasingly popular, parentally-arranged marriages are still preferred as the former result in the withdrawal of vital support structures. Grover (2011) in her study of a low-income neighbourhood in Delhi draws attention to how women in self-arranged as opposed to arranged marriages cannot avail of parental refuge in situations of marital distress.

[8] Sharing the *huqqā* and accepting water serve as signifiers of equality among castes.

[9] There is in fact a higher proportion of bachelors among the Jats as compared to the other castes (see author 2018).

[10] Valmikis are also Dalits but are considered by Chamars to be lower in status than them.

[11] See also Staples who shows that seemingly 'static rules are regularly manipulated, reinterpreted or broken, across a range of different contexts' (2015, 75).

[12] There is no consensus in the academic writing on the origins of colourism in India (Glenn 2008).

[13] See Glenn on the use of skin lightening products in various societies around the world. She notes that in terms of sheer numbers, Indians and diasporic Indians constitute the largest market for skin lighteners with the major consumers being women between the ages of 16-35 for whom 'light skin constitutes valuable symbolic capital in the marriage market' (2008, 289).

[14] None of my key cross-regional bride informants had children from a previous marriage in their native states. However, I met Jeeti (73, CRB) who had come to Barampur in the early 1960s from Pakur district in Jharkhand as the wife of a Chamar. She had arrived in Barampur with her son from her first marriage and later had a son from her second marriage. Her older son was 35 during my fieldwork, he was illiterate and unmarried. My Chamar facilitator told

me, that his caste status was 'unknown' and he did not have any right to the property of his step-father. Jeeti's younger son was its legitimate heir.

[15] Writing on local inter-caste marriages in Punjab-Haryana during the colonial period, Chowdhry (2007) notes that the caste of the man carried sufficient legitimacy and weight. The children born of a Chuhra or Chamar (Dalit) woman accepted in marriage by a Jat man were called Jats, even though they were often ridiculed as children of Chuhra or Chamar mothers.

[16] Exchange marriage involving the exchange of spouses between two or more families is regarded as conflicting with the ideal of *kanyādān* ["gift of a maiden" without accepting anything in return] and the norm of hypergamous marriage that makes wife-givers inferior to wife-takers (Milner 1988) and is thus considered a lower form of marriage, among upper castes and 'sanskritising' communities. .

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