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Can Love Conquer Caste?

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Indian Government Supports Mixed Unions, But Couples Who Defy System Face Violence

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NEW DELHI -- She was a gutsy student leader known for hunger strikes and provocative street theater at universities across the country, exposing the plight of India's beleaguered lower castes. He was a worldly gadfly with a passion for ending nuclear proliferation and exposing environmental crimes.

They fell in love in Iraq nearly 18 years ago while campaigning for peace before the [Persian Gulf](#) War. Their romance bloomed, and within three months they were engaged.

But their marriage a year later ushered in another war: In tying the knot, they openly defied India's deeply entrenched taboos against inter-caste marriage. Anita Pharti, now 42, came from the Dalit caste, still known as untouchables, the lowest in India's social order. Her husband, Rajeev Singh, 45, is a Rajput, traditionally a landholding caste that had for centuries ruled over Pharti's peasant community.

"My family was completely aghast," Singh recalled, sitting with Pharti in their cozy living room, where they have helped clandestine inter-caste couples elope. "My father said he wouldn't let it happen. But I felt so sure about Anita. We were able to fight back. But we were the lucky ones. Many still get murdered for this."

Even though India legalized inter-caste marriage more than 50 years ago, newlyweds are still threatened by violence, most often from their families. As more young urban and small-town Indians start to rebel and choose mates outside of arranged marriages and caste commandments, killings of inter-caste couples have increased, according to a recent study by the All India Democratic Women's Association.

In the past month, seven so-called honor killings have targeted inter-caste couples. In the latest incident, a Hindu youth in Bihar was beaten by villagers this week and thrown under an oncoming train because he sent a love letter to a girl of a different caste. The attacks continue despite decades of government decrees intended to dismantle the bulwark of caste, which is widely seen as the glue of traditional Indian society but is considered among the most corrosive features of the emerging new India.

"The recent rise in violence actually shows that the younger generation -- especially women -- are slowly gaining individual freedom in marriage. But the older generation still cling to the old ways where marriage is still a symbol of status, not emotional love," said Shashi Kiran, a lawyer in [India's Supreme Court](#) who married outside her caste and is handling several honor-killing cases. "It shows a society still in transition and wrestling with deep change."

As part of a controversial incentive for inter-caste couples to marry, the government recently began offering \$1,000 bonuses. That's nearly a year's salary for the vast majority of Indians. Smaller cash payments first started in 2006 after a Supreme Court ruling in which judges described several high-profile honor killings as acts of "barbarism" and labeled the caste system "a curse on the nation."

"The government is again deeply concerned over the low rate of conviction and high rate of acquittal of those people involved in incidents of atrocities on people belonging to lower castes," said Meira Kumar, the minister for social justice and empowerment, who is from a lower caste. "This is not the only way to end the caste discrimination, but one has to start somewhere."

B.R. Ambedkar, the country's most famous Dalit leader and chief architect of the Indian constitution, called for an end to caste consciousness more than 60 years ago. He promoted inter-caste marriage as the most practical way to blur caste lines and render them irrelevant.

Despite India's egalitarian veneer, there remains an invisible separation between the country's upper and lower castes that lasts from birth to death. Meals are rarely shared between Brahmins and Dalits, the top and bottom brackets of the caste system, which also includes a constellation of in-between castes. Restaurants are often self-segregated along caste lines. Some Hindu temples are off-limits to certain lower castes. Even among minority Christians -- presumably a casteless religion -- some graveyards are stratified by caste.

For most Indians, opportunities in education, employment and marriage are still determined by the ancient social hierarchy of caste. Despite economic growth that has helped create a burgeoning middle class, sociologists say the caste system still represents the highest barrier to social mobility. Fewer than 5 percent of India's 1.1 billion people are Brahmins, while more than 70 percent come from lower-level castes.

Some of the most recent honor killings are being investigated in small towns outside New Delhi. Several involve runaways from different castes who were slain for eloping. This summer, a father turned himself in to police after using a knife to kill his 19-year-old daughter for marrying a Dalit factory worker.

There have even been cases overseas. In January, Subhash Chander, 57, an Indian immigrant living in Chicago, set a fire that killed his pregnant daughter,

his son-in-law and his 3-year-old grandson. He told investigators that his daughter had married a man from a lower caste without permission. Similar cases have been reported in England and Australia.

Encouraging inter-caste marriages would break down discrimination and weave together millions of caste-segregated families, creating a new generation of "India's version of Obama," said Prem Chowdhry, author of the book "Contentious Marriages, Eloping Couples."

But rather than pay inter-caste couples, she believes the government should help organize a countrywide discussion on inter-caste marriages. Popular culture should be the venue, she said, with soap opera plots, Bollywood actors and famous cricket stars used to start a dialogue. "Caste has to be discussed more openly in modern India. We shouldn't be so arrogant as to deny one of our main weaknesses. Helping inter-caste marriage take off in India would be a major attack on the caste system," Chowdhry said. "For the future of India, it could mean much more time and energy to focus on lifting the majority of the country out of poverty."

Internet matchmaking sites in India allow those searching for love to list their caste, along with skin color and educational background. Most women still prefer to marry within their caste, according to a survey by popular online matrimony site Shaadi.com.

Some interpretations of Hindu scripture appear to support the caste system, which dovetails with the idea of karma, in which one's birth is either high or low as a reward or punishment for behavior in a previous life.

But sociologists say ideas about ambition and social mobility in India's new economy are slowly crumbling support for the caste system. The system has also taken hits from a program of preferences for lower-caste Indians that has started to bring members of different castes together on college campuses and at work. In addition, there is a tiny but steadily growing number of young, urban Indians who are rejecting caste-based marriages arranged by parents, opting instead to find a person they are attracted to, regardless of caste. Pharti and Singh say they worry about young couples going through the same struggles they faced. They counsel skeptical parents about their children's inter-caste unions, and they help those in hiding get married and start a home.

When Pharti told her parents she would marry a Rajput, her Dalit family was terrified. "My family worried that I would spend a lifetime of being abused for being Dalit," she said. "And because I was educated, I wouldn't be able to bear it. Even my Dalit activist friends said, 'You are marrying a Rajput? Are your fellow Dalits not good enough for you?' "

There were other tensions. At their wedding, Singh's father refused to participate in the ceremony, a slight against the bride's family that still makes

them bristle with anger.

"To me, caste is Hindu terrorism," said Singh, looking over at the couple's two young sons playing nearby. "We just wish for a better future for India. And that can't include such obvious discrimination."

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