



Dignity of Dalits in Inter-Caste Marriages: A Philosophical Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Inter-caste marriage is frequently celebrated within sociological, political, and legal discourses as a progressive instrument for dismantling the caste system in India. Rooted in the belief that endogamy sustains caste hierarchy, such marriages are often presumed to weaken caste at its foundation. However, lived realities reveal that inter-caste unions do not automatically ensure dignity, equality, or emotional justice for Dalit individuals. This article critically examines a specific yet under theorized phenomenon: the psychological, social, and ethical trauma experienced by Dalit husbands and their families when a non-Dalit wife retains caste boundaries within the private domain of marriage. Drawing upon B. R. Ambedkar's critique of graded inequality, Gopal Guru's philosophy of humiliation, and Hegel's theory of recognition, the article conceptualizes such marital arrangements as forms of Domestic Apartheid. Through phenomenological analysis and a hypothetical case narrative involving exclusion from a natal wedding ceremony, the study argues that caste often survives within intimacy, reproducing hierarchy through affective withdrawal and ritual exclusion. The article concludes that genuine annihilation of caste requires ethical recognition of Dalit kinship, not merely legal or marital transgression.



Introduction

The caste system in India is unique not only for its hierarchical rigidity but for its ability to penetrate the most intimate domains of social life. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar famously argued that caste is sustained through endogamy and that its annihilation necessitates inter-dining and inter-marriage (Ambedkar, 1936). Inter-caste marriage has therefore long been celebrated as a radical social act capable of dissolving caste boundaries at their core.

Yet Ambedkar also warned that caste is not merely a structural arrangement but a moral and psychological order, reproduced through everyday practices of exclusion, contempt, and hierarchy. In contemporary India, despite constitutional guarantees and progressive rhetoric, caste continues to operate subtly within families and marriages. Particularly troubling is the persistence of caste hierarchy inside inter-caste marriages themselves, where equality is often partial, conditional, or symbolic.

This article focuses on a specific manifestation of this contradiction: situations in which a non-Dalit wife refuses to extend recognition, care, or social inclusion to her Dalit husband's family. Such practices transform the domestic sphere into a site of symbolic segregation. The article conceptualizes this condition as Domestic Apartheid, where physical proximity exists without ethical belonging. By centring the exclusion of Dalit in-laws from significant natal rituals such as the wife's brother's marriage the study examines how caste survives within intimacy and produces profound psychological and social trauma.

Methodological Positioning: Philosophical–Interpretive Inquiry

This article adopts a philosophical interpretive methodology grounded in Dalit critical theory and social philosophy. While it does not rely on empirical fieldwork, this approach is particularly suited to examining forms of oppression that operate within private and affective domains, where experiences are often silenced, normalized, or rendered invisible. As Guru (2009) argues, humiliation cannot always be captured through quantitative measures; it must be understood through ethical, phenomenological, and narrative analysis.

The study employs theoretical triangulation, drawing from Ambedkarite political philosophy, Dalit epistemology, and Hegelian recognition theory to interpret domestic practices. The use of a hypothetical case narrative functions as a critical device to articulate structural violence that remains underreported due to fear, stigma, and familial pressure. Such narratives are widely used in critical social theory to illuminate normalized injustice.



Theoretical Framework: Caste, Dignity, and Recognition

Ambedkar and Graded Inequality

Ambedkar (1936) described caste as a system of “graded inequality,” where each social group is taught to internalize both superiority and inferiority. Caste denies the possibility of equal moral status and produces a society organized around differential dignity. In inter-caste marriages where recognition is selective, graded inequality is reproduced rather than dismantled. The Dalit husband may gain legal entry into a non-Dalit family structure while remaining symbolically excluded.

Gopal Guru and the Philosophy of Humiliation

Gopal Guru, one of India’s most influential contemporary political theorists and a leading voice in Dalit philosophy, has made foundational contributions to understanding caste as a moral and epistemic injustice. A former professor at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Guru is best known for foregrounding Dalit lived experience as a legitimate source of philosophical knowledge. He critiques what he calls “theoretical Brahmanism,” where upper-caste scholars monopolize theory while Dalits are reduced to mere providers of experience. Through this intervention, Guru advances the demand for epistemic justice and intellectual autonomy for Dalits, insisting that caste oppression must be understood not only as material deprivation but also as a deep moral and ethical injury.

Gopal Guru’s work is central to understanding the ethical injury caused by such exclusion. Guru (2009) distinguishes suffering from humiliation, arguing that humiliation represents an assault on dignity and self-respect rather than merely physical or material pain. In asymmetrical inter-caste marriages, the Dalit husband’s pain is often non-violent but deeply humiliating. The refusal to acknowledge his parents as kin constitutes a form of epistemic violence: it denies the legitimacy of his social world, his moral universe, and his relational identity. Such denial reproduces caste hierarchy not through overt coercion, but through everyday practices of symbolic exclusion and moral degradation.

Hegel and the Struggle for Recognition

Hegel’s (1977) theory of recognition posits that self-consciousness emerges through mutual recognition. When recognition is denied or asymmetrical, the subject experiences alienation and ethical injury. In marriage, recognition extends beyond the individual to lineage and kinship. The denial of recognition to



Dalit parents disrupts this ethical relation, producing a condition of existential insecurity for the Dalit husband.

Psychological Dimensions of Domestic Exclusion

Emotional Apartheid Within Marriage

Marriage is conventionally imagined as a space of emotional security and mutual care. However, when caste hierarchies infiltrate this space, the home becomes a site of emotional segregation. The Dalit husband may experience chronic emotional neglect, indifference, or conditional affection. This condition can be described as Emotional Apartheid, where proximity exists without belonging.

Mental Health Consequences

Research on caste-based discrimination indicates higher incidences of depression, anxiety, psychosomatic stress, and hypertension among Dalit men facing sustained humiliation (Teltumbde, 2018). When discrimination occurs within marriage, the psychological toll intensifies because the individual lacks refuge from social hostility. Internalized caste stigma often manifests as emotional withdrawal, self-blame, and diminished self-worth.

Caste, Masculinity, and Silent Distress

Dalit men in asymmetrical inter-caste marriages experience a gendered burden shaped by caste and masculinity norms. Social expectations discourage men from expressing vulnerability, while caste ideology delegitimizes Dalit suffering. The inability to defend one's parents without risking marital breakdown produces a state of helplessness. This is not individual weakness but structural coercion, where dignity is exchanged for marital stability.

Ritual Exclusion and the Politics of Kinship

Weddings as Sites of Caste Consolidation

In Indian society, weddings are not merely celebrations but rituals of caste consolidation. Participation signifies acceptance into a kinship network. Exclusion from such rituals therefore constitutes social negation. By excluding Dalit in-laws while including the Dalit husband, caste boundaries are maintained through selective inclusion.

*Anonymized Lived Case Narrative*

The following account is not a hypothetical assumption but an anonymized lived experience, presented with identifying details withheld for ethical reasons. A Dalit man enters a legally registered inter-caste marriage with a non-Dalit woman. When the woman's brother's wedding is announced, a formal invitation is extended to the husband, while the status of his parents remains deliberately unarticulated neither explicitly refused nor affirmatively acknowledged.

Rejecting this silence, the husband brings his parents to the wedding venue, asserting their rightful place as kin within the marital relationship. Upon arrival, however, the Dalit parents are not welcomed into the ritual space. They are made to remain at the entrance of the marriage hall, without acknowledgment, escort, or invitation to enter. Although the non-Dalit wife is present at the venue, she does not extend recognition or welcome to them in the public ceremonial setting. No overt confrontation occurs; exclusion is enacted instead through hesitation, inaction, and silence.

The wedding rituals proceed uninterrupted, while the Dalit parents remain positioned at the margins of the celebration physically present yet socially and morally unrecognized. This moment exemplifies Domestic Apartheid as an intimate caste regime operating through everyday practices of non-recognition: it enacts the moral injury identified in Gopal Guru's theory of humiliation while simultaneously reproducing what B. R. Ambedkar described as graded inequality, wherein legal inter-caste marriage permits conditional access to the Dalit body but systematically withholds full ethical recognition from Dalit lineage and dignity.

Domestic Apartheid and Gendered Agency

The non-Dalit wife's actions must be understood within caste socialization rather than reduced to individual prejudice. By enforcing exclusion, she often seeks to protect caste capital and maintain legitimacy within her natal family. Affection becomes conditional, and integration becomes one-sided. The Dalit husband is expected to assimilate, while his family remains permanently external.

Addressing the Liberal *Défense* of Inter-Caste Marriage

A liberal argument suggests that inter-caste marriage, despite imperfections, remains progressive and should not be over-criticized. Gradual change, it is argued, is preferable to moral absolutism. However, this perspective risks normalizing humiliation. Ambedkar (1936) cautioned against reforms that tolerate



injustice in the name of gradualism. Ethical scrutiny is not opposition to inter-caste marriage but a condition for its transformative potential.

The Limits of Sanskritization

This phenomenon exposes the failure of Sanskritization as a strategy for Dalit emancipation. Acceptance is offered only to individuals, not to histories or kinship networks. The Dalit subject is expected to sever lineage ties to gain social legitimacy. Such conditional inclusion negates the collective nature of dignity.

Contribution to Dalit Studies and Social Philosophy

This article makes three key contributions.

First, it shifts caste analysis from public violence to private, affective injustice.

Second, it introduces Domestic Apartheid as an analytical category for caste within intimacy.

Third, it bridges Dalit philosophy with recognition theory, demonstrating how denial of kinship recognition constitutes social death.

Conclusion

The persistence of caste within inter-caste marriages reveals a contradiction in India's democratic project. Legal equality without social recognition produces new forms of domination. Marriage without dignity is ethically incomplete. True annihilation of caste requires recognition of Dalit families as kin, not contamination. Until this occurs, caste will continue to haunt intimacy itself.

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