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## **Beyond Sanskritization: Public Decasteisation and Private Persistence Among Educated Populations in Contemporary Kerala**

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**DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20145143>**

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### **ARTICLE DETAILS**

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 28-04-2026

**Published:** 10-05-2026

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**Keywords:**

*Sanskritization; Caste Transformation; Public Decasteisation; Caste and Marriage; Inter-caste Interaction; Social change*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study argues that “public decasteisation and private persistence,” rather than classical Sanskritisation, best explains contemporary caste transformation in Kerala. Drawing on empirical data from 490 respondents aged 15–55 years, the study critically re-evaluates M. N. Srinivas’s Sanskritisation theory. Using a cross-sectional, non-probability sampling design, the study focuses on educated, institutionally connected individuals. Findings reveal a sharp decline in belief in caste among younger generations: only 20% of respondents aged 15–18 and 16.9% of those aged 19–25 reported believing in caste, compared with higher proportions among older groups. A chi-square test confirmed a significant association between age and caste belief ( $\chi^2 = 31.64$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Across age groups, respondents widely accepted caste-free interactions in education, friendship, and social mobility. The findings challenge classical assumptions about Sanskritisation, as over 90% of respondents reported non-vegetarian dietary habits, suggesting no substantial shift toward upper-caste ritual practices. Instead, the evidence suggests social convergence driven by functional participation

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and democratic values rather than ritual imitation. However, caste continues to shape marriage and kinship, with strong intra-caste marriage patterns persisting.

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## **Introduction**

Caste continues to shape social relations, hierarchy, and resource access in India as a deeply embedded structure. While classical studies such as Dumont (1970) explored ritual hierarchy and inherited status, this study centres on how caste currently influences social relations in Kerala.

M. N. Srinivas introduced the concept of Sanskritisation to explain how lower-caste groups sought upward mobility by adopting upper-caste rituals and customs. This framework emphasised ritual and cultural imitation within caste hierarchies.

Later scholars critiqued Sanskritisation for focusing on symbolic mobility, highlighting that education, urbanisation, and modernisation also reshape caste dynamics. Contemporary research sees caste as dynamic, shaped by changing social contexts.

In Kerala, anti-caste reform, education, and welfare policies have challenged public caste barriers, with scholars such as Jeffrey (1992) and Heller (1999) noting more caste-neutral interactions in public institutions and civic spaces.

Caste persists in private domains such as marriage and kinship, even among educated individuals (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2008), raising important concerns about the continued relevance of Sanskritisation in explaining contemporary caste transformations in Kerala.

This study examines 490 educated respondents in Kerala, analysing caste attitudes and practices across public and private domains. The findings indicate a visible decline of caste boundaries in public life but continued private persistence, especially in marriage. The study proposes 'public decasteisation and private persistence' as a better framework than classical Sanskritisation for understanding this transformation.

## **Objectives of the study**

The main objective of this study is to examine changing patterns of caste attitudes and practices among educated, institutionally connected populations in Kerala. It also aims to assess the relevance of M. N. Srinivas's theory of Sanskritization in explaining these shifts.



The study specifically aims:

1. To examine generational differences in belief in caste across different age groups.
2. To analyse the extent of inter-caste interaction in everyday social domains such as education, friendship, mobility, and food sharing.
3. To assess whether present cultural practices, particularly food habits, reflect patterns associated with Sanskritization or indicate alternative forms of social change.
4. To examine the role of functional factors such as education, democratic values, constitutional awareness, and media exposure in shaping caste-related attitudes and practices.
5. To investigate the persistence of caste in private domains, particularly in relation to marriage and kinship structures.
6. To develop a conceptual understanding of caste transformation through the framework of “public decasteisation and private persistence.”

### **Research questions**

The following research questions guide the study:

1. How does belief in caste vary across different age groups among the sampled population?
2. To what extent have caste boundaries weakened in everyday social interaction, particularly in domains such as education, friendship, mobility, and food sharing?
3. Do current cultural practices reflect patterns associated with Sanskritization, or do they indicate alternative forms of social convergence?
4. What role do institutional factors such as education, democratic participation, and media exposure play in shaping caste-related attitudes and practices?
5. Why does caste continue to persist strongly in marriage and kinship structures despite reduced significance in public interaction?
6. How can caste transformation in contemporary Kerala be theoretically understood in relation to differences between public and private domains of social life?



## Hypotheses

The study advances the following hypotheses:

H1

Caste has a reduced influence on attitudes and practices in public domains such as education, friendship, mobility, and shared social interaction among the sampled population.

H2

Caste continues to exert significant influence in private domains, particularly in marriage and kinship structures, as reflected in the prevalence of intra-caste marriage patterns.

H3

Existing patterns of caste change among educated populations in Kerala are shaped more by organised integration and shared social environments than by processes of ritual imitation associated with Sanskritization.

## Theoretical framework

The present study is situated within broader sociological debates on caste, social mobility, and social transformation in modern India. The analysis primarily engages with M. N. Srinivas's concept of Sanskritization while also drawing on later critiques that emphasise modernisation, institutional transformation, and the uneven reconfiguration of caste across domains of social life.

Srinivas (1952, 1966) developed the concept of Sanskritization to explain mobility within the caste system. According to this framework, lower caste groups could seek upward social mobility by adopting the rituals, dietary practices, customs, and lifestyles associated with dominant upper castes, particularly Brahmanical groups. Sanskritization, therefore, interpreted social mobility as a process of cultural imitation operating within an existing hierarchical order. The framework was significant because it challenged the earlier assumption that caste was entirely rigid and incapable of internal mobility.

Despite its influence, a wide range of scholars later questioned the explanatory adequacy of the concept of Sanskritization in present-day Indian society. Beteille (1996) argued that the framework overemphasised symbolic and ritual mobility while giving insufficient attention to structural inequalities and formal social transformations. Similarly, Yogendra Singh (1973) emphasised that modernisation



processes—including education, democratic participation, urbanisation, migration, and state intervention—had reshaped social relations beyond mere ritual imitation. More recent scholarship has demonstrated that caste today operates through complex interactions involving identity, politics, economy, and collective participation rather than solely through ritual hierarchy (Gupta, 2000; Dirks, 2001).

These theoretical debates are especially relevant in Kerala, where historical experiences of anti-caste reform, literacy expansion, migration, welfare-oriented governance, and democratic mobilisation have significantly transformed public social life. Shared institutional environments such as schools, colleges, workplaces, transportation systems, and civic spaces increasingly facilitate interaction across caste boundaries. In various such contexts, caste restrictions appear less socially operative than in earlier periods.

Even so, caste continues to exert considerable influence within family and kinship structures, particularly in relation to marriage and community identity. This coexistence of public openness and private continuity suggests that caste transformation in recent Kerala has not occurred uniformly across all areas of social life.

The patterns observed here are difficult to explain solely in terms of Sanskritization. Classical Sanskritization assumes vertical mobility through the adoption of upper-caste cultural norms within an enduring hierarchy. However, the empirical patterns observed in this study suggest that social change among educated populations in Kerala is not primarily driven by movement toward Brahmanical ritual practices. Instead, caste appears to weaken in public and community-based interaction while remaining influential within intimate and kinship-based domains.

To explain this uneven transformation, the study proposes the conceptual framework of “public decasteisation and private persistence.” Public decasteisation refers to the declining practical significance of caste in public and institutional domains such as education, friendship, mobility, workplaces, and shared social interaction. In these spaces, interaction increasingly occurs through common organisational participation rather than through caste-regulated boundaries. Education, democratic values, constitutional awareness, media exposure, and everyday functional engagement contribute to the normalisation of caste-free interaction in public life.

Private persistence, on the other hand, refers to the continued influence of caste within family and kinship-based domains, particularly marriage, inheritance, and community identity. While individuals



may participate in caste-neutral public interaction, family structures and kinship expectations continue to reproduce caste boundaries through endogamy and social continuity.

Unlike Sanskritization, which emphasises upward mobility through ritual imitation within a hierarchical order, the proposed framework highlights domain-specific transformation and influential mediation. It indicates that caste in today's Kerala is neither disappearing entirely nor remaining unchanged. Instead, caste is being unevenly reorganised across the public and private spheres of social life. The framework, therefore, provides a more context-sensitive understanding of caste transformation in emerging Kerala and contributes to broader sociological debates on caste, modernity, and social change in India.

### **Research Methodology**

The present study adopts a quantitative cross-sectional design to examine shifts in caste attitudes and practices among educated and institutionally connected populations in current Kerala. The research is empirical and seeks to assess the ongoing relevance of M. N. Srinivas's theory of Sanskritisation in the context of present social transformation.

### **Data Collection**

The study is based on primary data collected via a structured questionnaire administered to 490 respondents across four age cohorts, aged 15 to 55 years. The questionnaire was designed to examine attitudes and practices relating to caste across the public and private domains of social life.

The major themes covered in the questionnaire included:

- Belief in caste,
- Attitudes toward caste discrimination,
- Interactions between castes in education, friendships, mobility, and sharing food,
- Food preferences and cultural customs,
- Perceptions of democracy, constitutional principles, and media impact,
- Marriage customs and family origins.

The survey instrument primarily consisted of closed-ended questions to facilitate comparison across age groups and social domains.



## **Sampling Strategy**

The study uses a non-probability sampling method. Respondents were selected primarily from educational institutions and socially active settings in Kerala. Because the sample comprises educated, institutionally connected individuals, the survey results are interpreted as indicative of emerging social trends rather than statistically representative of the entire population of Kerala.

The study is analytical rather than strictly generalisable. It seeks to identify broader patterns of caste transformation among socially integrated populations exposed to education, collective participation, and democratic social environments.

## **Demographic Profile of Respondents**

The sample included respondents from diverse castes and social backgrounds. A significant proportion of respondents were younger, reflecting the study's focus on generational transformation in caste attitudes and practices. The respondents were drawn primarily from educational and institutional settings, including public and aided institutions, with a smaller proportion from private institutions.

The study did not aim to ensure proportional representation across caste, religion, or regional categories. Instead, the focus was on identifying observable trends in caste attitudes and social interaction among institutionally connected populations.

## **Statistical Tools and Analytical Framework**

The analysis primarily uses descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, percentage analyses, and cross-group comparisons across age cohorts. These methods were used to identify patterns in caste beliefs, inter-caste interactions, food practices, and marriage preferences.

In addition, chi-square tests of independence were employed to examine the statistical relationship between selected variables, particularly:

- Age group and belief in caste,
- Age group and marriage preference.

The analytical framework of the study is organised around three major dimensions:

1. Normative Attitudes – including belief in caste, equality, and perceptions of discrimination.



2. Everyday Social Interaction – including inter-caste engagement in education, friendship, travel, and food sharing.
3. Family and Kinship Structures – including marriage patterns and the persistence of caste boundaries in private life.

This framework enables the study to distinguish between caste practices operating in public ordinary spaces and those continuing within intimate and kinship-based domains.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the study's academic purpose before data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, and no personally identifiable information was collected.

The data collected were used solely for academic purposes, and respondents were given the option to withhold sensitive details, including caste identity, if they wished.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Certain limitations of the study must be acknowledged. First, the use of non-probability sampling limits the statistical generalisability of the observations. Because the sample primarily represents educated and institutionally connected populations, the observed patterns may reflect more inclusive social attitudes than those prevailing in the wider population.

Second, the study relies on self-reported responses, which may be influenced by social desirability bias, particularly in questions about caste equality and discrimination.

Third, although the study incorporates chi-square tests for selected variables, the overall analysis remains descriptive and does not employ advanced inferential statistical techniques to establish causal relationships.

Finally, the study adopts a cross-sectional design, capturing attitudes and practices at a single point in time rather than tracing changes across generations. Despite these limitations, the consistency of responses across multiple social domains provides important insight into emerging patterns of caste transformation in contemporary Kerala.

## Findings and Analysis

**Generational Variation in Belief in Caste**

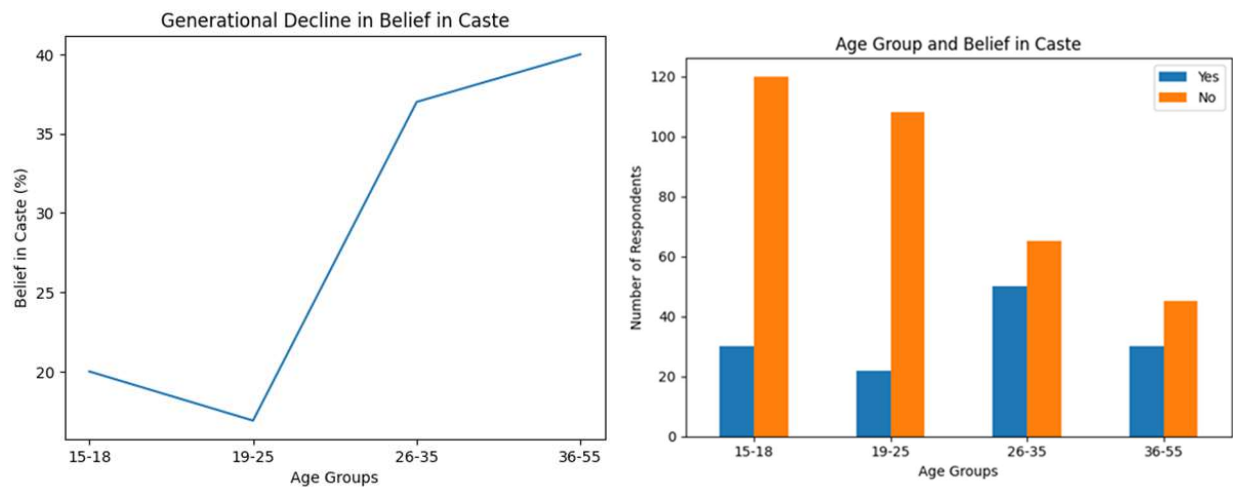
One of the clearest patterns emerging from the survey is the generational decline in belief in caste. Younger respondents reported significantly lower levels of belief in caste than older respondents. The empirical data indicate that caste is less ideologically important among younger groups and those more engaged with institutions.

Table 1: Belief in Caste Across Age Groups

Age Group	Believe in Caste	Do Not Believe	No Opinion
15–18	20.0%	80.0%	—
19–25	16.9%	83.1%	—
26–35	37.0%	48.1%	14.9%
36–55	40.0%	60.0%	—

*Source: Author's Field Survey (2025).*

Figure 1: Age Group, Belief, and Caste



A chi-square test of independence was conducted to assess the relationship between age group and belief in caste. The analysis revealed a statistically significant association between age and belief in caste ( $\chi^2 = 31.64$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Younger respondents were significantly less likely than older respondents to express belief in caste. This outcome supports the argument that generational change and institutional exposure have contributed to the weakening of caste-based attitudes among younger populations.



The responses indicate a gradual yet uneven shift in caste attitudes across generations rather than a uniform disappearance. While older respondents continue to retain a stronger attachment to caste identity, younger respondents appear increasingly oriented towards social interaction beyond traditional caste boundaries.

### Inter-Caste Interaction in Everyday Social Life

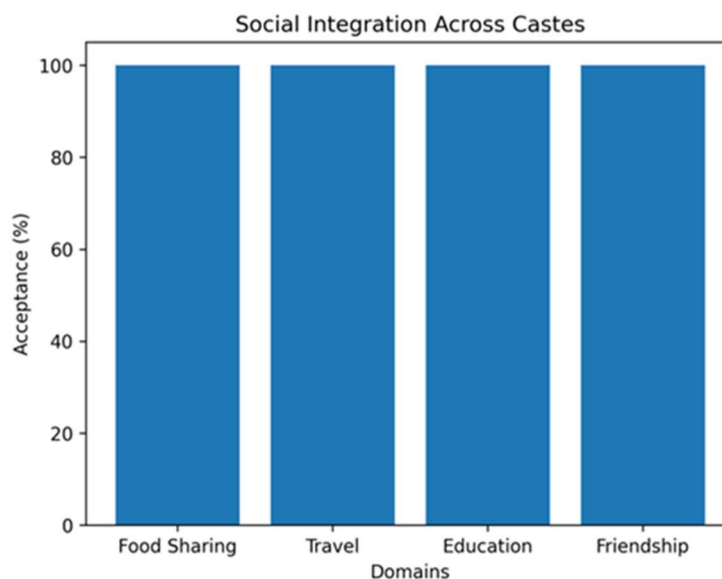
The survey reveals widespread acceptance of inter-caste interaction across major domains of everyday social life. Respondents across all age groups reported a high degree of openness to interacting beyond caste boundaries in education, friendship, mobility, and food sharing.

Table 2: Acceptance of Inter-Caste Interaction Across Social Domains

Social Domain	Acceptance Level
Education	Nearly Universal
Friendship	Nearly Universal
Travel and Mobility	Nearly Universal
Food Sharing	Nearly Universal

Source: Author's Field Survey (2025).

Figure 2: Inter-Caste Interaction Across Social Domains





For many respondents, caste is no longer a major obstacle to routine social interaction within the sampled population. Shared structural environments, such as schools, colleges, workplaces, and public spaces, appear to facilitate interactions that are increasingly detached from caste restrictions. The near-universal acceptance of inter-caste interaction also indicates that social integration in recent Kerala is shaped more by shared institutional participation and democratic social values than by traditional caste hierarchies.

### Food Practices and the Limits of Sanskritization

Food practices serve as an important indicator for assessing the ongoing relevance of Sanskritization. Classical formulations of Sanskritization assumed that upward social mobility involved adopting upper-caste practices, such as vegetarianism and ritual purity (Srinivas, 1966).

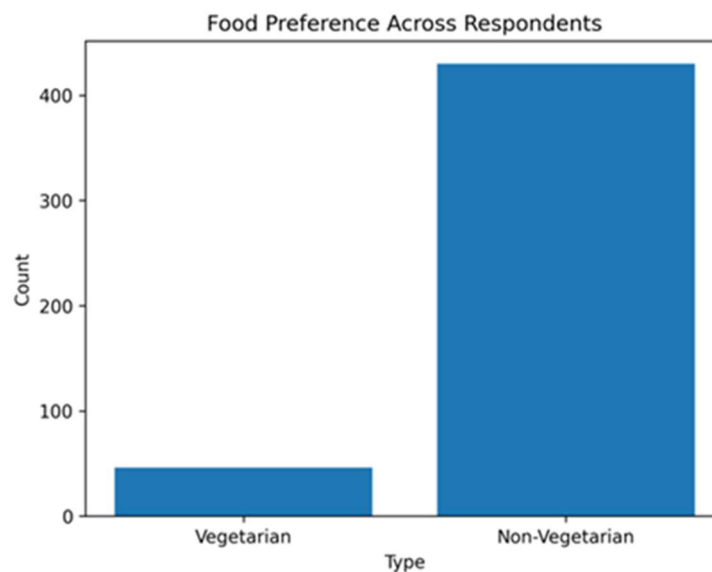
However, the findings of the present study do not support this expectation.

Table 3: Food Preferences Among Respondents

Food Preference	Percentage
Vegetarian	9.4%
Non-Vegetarian	90.6%

Source: Author's Field Survey (2025).

Figure 3: Food Preferences Among Respondents





The extensive prevalence of non-vegetarian dietary habits across various age groups indicates that caste transformation within the surveyed population is not correlated with a transition towards upper-caste ritual standards. Instead, respondents seem to engage in shared cultural practices that surpass traditional caste boundaries. Collectively, these observations undermine the assertion that emulating Brahmanical lifestyles drives social mobility. The evidence more accurately smacks of horizontal social convergence, shaped by shared structural and social experiences, rather than vertical advancement within a ritual hierarchy.

### Persistence of Caste in Marriage and Kinship

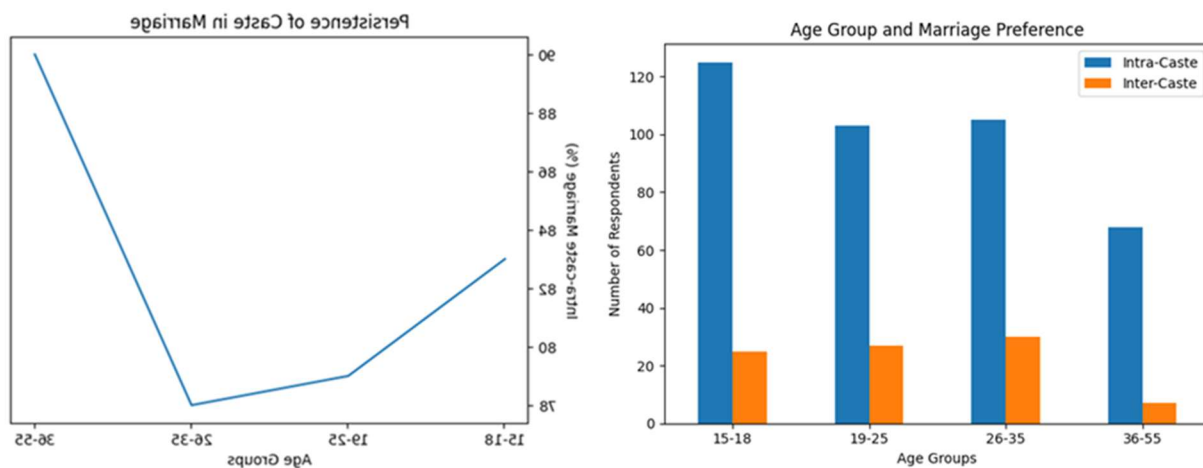
Despite weakening caste boundaries in public interactions, caste remains influential in marriage and kinship relations. The survey demonstrates a strong prevalence of intra-caste marriage patterns across all age groups.

Table 4: Marriage Patterns Across Age Groups

Age Group	Intra-Caste Marriage	Inter-Caste Marriage
15–18	83%	17%
19–25	79%	21%
26–35	78%	22%
36–55	90%	10%

Source: Author’s Field Survey (2025).

Figure 4: Persistence of Intra-Caste Marriage Across Age Groups





A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the relationship between age group and marriage preference. The relationship was not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 5.62, df = 3, p > .05$ ), indicating that intra-caste marriage patterns remain consistently strong across generations.

Even public liberals face caste barriers in marriage and kinship, reflecting persistent caste endogamy among educated, urban populations (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2008).

### **Institutional Influences on Caste Attitudes**

Respondents expressed strong support for democratic values, constitutional equality, and social inclusion. Education, media exposure, and collective participation were widely perceived as important factors shaping social awareness and reducing caste prejudice.

The assumption suggests that institutional environments play a major role in reshaping caste attitudes in present-day Kerala. Unlike traditional caste systems organised primarily through ritual hierarchy, contemporary interactions are increasingly mediated by educational participation, democratic values, and shared civic experience.

### **Public Decentralisation and Private Persistence**

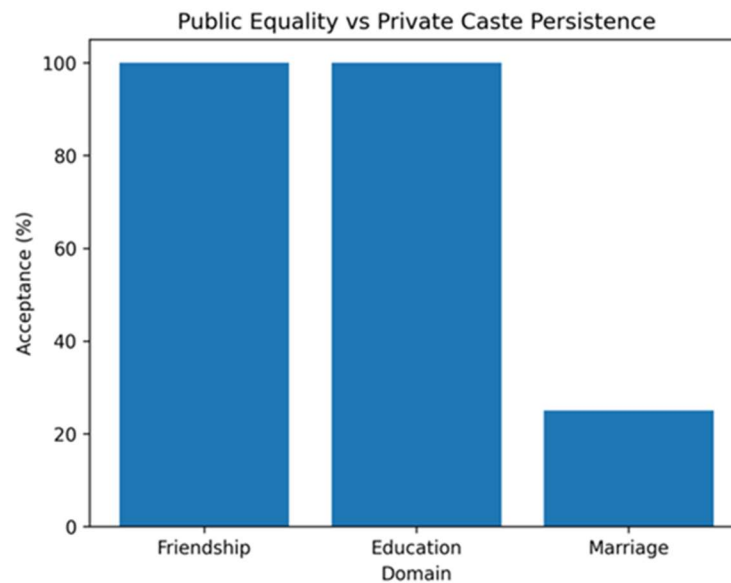
A major pattern emerging from the inquiry is the contrast between caste practices in public interaction and those operating within private social relations.

Table 5: Public and Private Domains of Caste Practice

Domain	Nature of Caste Practice
Education	Weak Caste Influence
Friendship	Weak Caste Influence
Food Sharing	Weak Caste Influence
Mobility and Travel	Weak Caste Influence
Marriage	Strong Caste Influence
Kinship Relations	Strong Caste Influence

*Source: Author's Field Survey (2025).*

Figure 5: Public Decentralisation and Private Persistence



The reflections suggest that caste has significantly diminished in public and institutional spheres, yet it remains influential within family and kinship networks. Daily interactions show greater social openness and integration into institutions, but marriage practices still uphold caste boundaries.

This irregular transformation pattern cannot be fully explained by Sanskritization, which relies on mobility through ritual imitation within a hierarchical structure. Instead, the evidence indicates that caste in modern Kerala is undergoing distinct changes in both the public and private spheres of social life.

### Discussion and Theoretical Implications

The research reveals important changes in how caste operates among educated, socially integrated groups in modern Kerala. Although caste remains a social institution, its impact differs across various areas of social life. These findings prompt a re-evaluation of traditional sociological theories of caste mobility, particularly the enduring significance of Sanskritization for understanding current social transformations.

M. N. Srinivas's concept of Sanskritization remains one of the most influential frameworks in Indian sociology for understanding caste mobility and social transformation. The theory proposed that lower-caste groups could improve their social status by adopting upper-caste rituals, dietary practices, and cultural lifestyles (Srinivas, 1952, 1966). Within this framework, upward mobility was associated with movement toward Brahmanical norms and ritual practices.

The survey evidence indicates a divergent direction. The survey shows that respondents across all age groups continue to practise non-vegetarianism, with no discernible shift towards vegetarianism or



towards other upper-caste ritual practices traditionally linked to Sanskritization. Concurrently, respondents report substantial inter-caste engagement across areas such as education, friendship, mobility, and food sharing. These findings imply that social transformation within the sampled population is not driven by cultural imitation within a ritual hierarchy. Rather, social interactions increasingly occur within shared institutional and civic environments, where caste distinctions hold diminished practical importance. In this context, the explanatory reach of Sanskritization appears narrower than earlier sociological formulations assumed, in contexts where institutional integration and democratic participation shape social interaction more strongly than ritual status does. This observation supports earlier critiques by scholars such as Béteille (1996) and Yogendra Singh (1973), who argued that caste transformation in modern India cannot be understood solely in terms of symbolic or ritual mobility.

Generational differences emerged quite sharply throughout the survey responses. Younger respondents expressed significantly lower levels of belief in caste than older age groups. The chi-square analysis further confirms a statistically significant relationship between age and caste belief, suggesting that changing social environments influence caste attitudes across generations. These findings indicate wider changes associated with education, migration, media exposure, democratic values, and community participation.

Kerala's social context is particularly important in this regard. The state's historical experience of anti-caste reform movements, literacy expansion, welfare-oriented governance, and political mobilisation created public environments in which caste restrictions became less socially visible in everyday interaction. Shared institutional spaces such as schools, colleges, workplaces, and civic environments facilitate social interaction that is increasingly detached from traditional caste boundaries.

However, caste continues to shape marriage and kinship relations in remarkably durable ways. to remain influential within marriage and kinship structures. The strong prevalence of intra-caste marriage patterns across all age groups indicates that caste boundaries continue to be reproduced through family structures and social networks. Even respondents who support caste-free interaction in public life continue to remain embedded within kinship systems that preserve caste continuity through endogamy and community identity.

What becomes visible here is a social reality in which public openness coexists with private forms of caste continuity, implying that caste transformation in modern Kerala is uneven rather than uniform. Different domains of social life experience different degrees of change, and the weakening of caste in one



sphere does not necessarily imply its disappearance in another. The outcomes, therefore, support the argument that caste today functions less as a rigid ritual hierarchy governing all aspects of social life and more as a socially adaptive structure operating differently across institutional and familial domains.

To explain this uneven transformation, the paper advances the framework of “public decasteisation and private persistence.” Public decasteisation refers to the declining practical significance of caste in public and institutional interactions, in which education, mobility, friendship, and civic participation increasingly occur beyond traditional caste boundaries. Private persistence, on the other hand, refers to the continued influence of caste within family, kinship, and marriage structures where endogamy and inherited social identity remain significant.

Unlike Sanskritization, which assumes upward mobility through ritual imitation within a hierarchical order, the proposed framework emphasises domain-specific transformation shaped by institutional integration and shared social environments. The framework, therefore, offers a more context-sensitive explanation of caste change in Kerala as it currently exists and contributes to broader sociological debates on caste, modernity, and social transformation in India.

The evidence indicates that caste in contemporary Kerala is neither disappearing entirely nor remaining unchanged. Rather, it is being reorganised unevenly across different domains of social life. This perspective offers an alternative way to understand caste transformation in modern India, particularly in contexts where institutional participation and democratic social life increasingly shape everyday interactions.

## **conclusion**

This analysis explored how caste attitudes and practices are evolving among educated and institutionally connected groups in modern Kerala, focusing on the enduring significance of M. N. Srinivas’s Sanskritization theory. Using primary survey data from 490 participants across four age groups, it examined generational differences in attitudes toward caste, inter-caste interactions, dietary customs, institutional influences, and marriage practices.

This investigation points toward important changes in the public visibility and operation of caste among educated populations in Kerala. Younger respondents reported significantly lower levels of belief in caste, and respondents across all age groups expressed strong acceptance of caste-free interaction in domains such as education, friendship, mobility, and food sharing. Statistical analysis further



demonstrated a significant relationship between age and belief in caste, indicating that caste attitudes vary across generations.

The evidence presented here also raises important questions about the continuing explanatory adequacy of the concept of Sanskritization. The overwhelming prevalence of non-vegetarian food practices across all age groups indicates that social change among the sampled population is not occurring through movement toward upper-caste ritual norms traditionally associated with Brahmanical mobility. Rather than reflecting ritual imitation, the observed patterns point toward horizontal social convergence shaped by democratic and institutional influences.

However, caste remains influential in private and kinship-based domains. The persistence of intra-caste marriage patterns across generations demonstrates that family structures continue to reproduce caste boundaries even where public interaction appears open and inclusive. The paper, therefore, shows that caste transformation in ongoing Kerala is uneven and domain-specific rather than uniform across all aspects of social life.

To interpret these patterns, the research proposed the framework of “public decasteisation and private persistence.” This framework explains how caste may lose practical significance in public and institutional interaction while continuing to shape marriage, kinship, and family identity. Unlike Sanskritization, which emphasises upward mobility through ritual imitation, the proposed framework highlights a differentiated form of transformation shaped by institutional integration and social participation.

Taken together, these observations contribute to broader sociological debates on caste, modernity, and institutional transformation in contemporary India by suggesting that classical models centred exclusively on ritual hierarchy are insufficient to understand the changing nature of caste in modern institutional contexts. Greater attention must be paid to the role of education, democratic values, institutional participation, and domain-specific social practices in shaping caste relations in recent India.

These observations, however, must be understood within the limitations of the study, since the sample primarily represents educated and socially integrated populations; the patterns identified here cannot be generalised to the entire population of Kerala. Further research using broader, more representative sampling methods, comparative regional analysis, and more advanced statistical techniques would help deepen understanding of caste transformation in contemporary Indian society.



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