

ARTICLE

# Caste No Bar? Non-Resident Indian Grooms Searching for Brides in Kolkata

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## Abstract

“Caste No Bar?” navigates through Kolkata’s upper-caste Hindu Bengali matrimonial landscape and probes the patterns of matchmaking among families seeking brides for NRI (non-resident Indian) grooms. The matrimonial market, I argue, neatly foregrounds everyday casteism. If the parent community in West Bengal harbours a distinguished obsession with caste, the Bengali diaspora transports such caste enthusiasm beyond geographical confines to reproduce and reinforce caste on a global terrain. The apparent liberal progressive image of educated Bengali families with well-educated NRI grooms is grossly denuded in the matrimonial market. Across matrimonial columns and matrimonial websites, most advertisements mention their own caste affiliations; some stipulate preferred caste affiliations of the desired spouse, while many declare “Caste No Bar,” an oft-adduced phrase which adequately disguises the caste-fervour underlining Kolkata’s matrimonial market. Foregrounding the permeating social acceptability of endogamous marriages, this article scouts for the subtext of “Caste No Bar” that permits selective exogamy and precludes most boundary-crossings in a caste-charged matrimonial landscape that tellingly underpins caste bigotry.

**Keywords:** caste; Kolkata; matrimony; matchmaking; non-resident Indian

For some months, a potential groom was looking for his prospective bride. Prohor, the thirty-six-year-old Bengali Brahmin groom, a graduate from one of India’s premier IITs (Indian Institute of Technology) had recently acquired an employer-sponsored Green Card to settle in Chicago as a research-scientist.<sup>1</sup> Educated, elite, and established, his engineer parents published a matrimonial advertisement for a potential bride who ticked off some essential requirements– “fair, good-looking, highly qualified, and *Brahmin*” (emphasis mine).

Arranging marriage and organising love are common practices mediated both by informal actors like parents and the extended family and by more formal agencies like newspapers and online matchmakers. For long, marriages in India have continued to be arranged with an

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<sup>1</sup> All names of respondents have been changed to maintain strict anonymity while discussing research findings. All interviews were conducted bilingually. All translations (where applicable) have been done by the author. In this article, I use the term “Bengali” to mean the Hindu community who identify their cultural roots in the Indian state of West Bengal.

assumption that brides and grooms are too naïve to make such sweeping life decisions. A variety of marriages come under the rubric of being “arranged” contingent on the degree of participation by potential brides and grooms in the selection process.<sup>2</sup> At one extreme, sits an arrangement where young people never meet and information regarding upcoming nuptials are verbally communicated to them. On the other end is the self-arranged love marriage where a romantic decision made by partners, vigilant enough that the choice conforms to family expectations, is endorsed by parental consent, thereafter arranged and celebrated.<sup>3</sup> Arranged marriages reflect a stunning continuity, displaying the centrality of primordial loyalties routinely renewed, renovated, and re-emphasised. Caste is just one example.

As a hierarchical sequence of intrinsic prejudices and relative privileges, castes stand in oppositional confrontation. While the dominance of caste in most, if not all, spheres of social life has been a reality across India, its eastern state West Bengal estimated an apparent obliteration of caste from any socio-political vocabulary to become a prelude to its liberal self-fashioning, rooted in claims of trailblazing western modernity as the country’s cultural vanguard. But this self-proclaimed caste-exceptionalism of West Bengal in wider caste-ridden India was a denial of caste, not an absence of the practice of caste.<sup>4</sup> Bengal’s matrimonial market, for instance, provides an obtrusive space for an exemplified exercise of caste practices. Bigotry of the parent community in West Bengal is exported overseas when non-resident Indians (NRIs) from educated middle-class families carry caste in their baggage across the world to enable its manifestation and reproduction on a global scale.<sup>5</sup> Caste bias continues unabated in NRI matchmaking and features an essential criterion in preference lists whipped up by grooms and families embarking on spouse selection.

Such upper-caste NRI grooms and their families made my sample set (gathered by snowball sampling and purposive sampling) whom I interviewed while analysing in tandem newspaper and online matrimonial advertisements in Kolkata from December 2023 to August 2024. Advertisements usually open with caste affiliations. While some indicate preferred caste affiliations of the desired spouse, many move to avouch “Caste No Bar,” a declaration disguising the pervasive caste-character of marital negotiations. The subtext of delusional “Caste No Bar” detects inherent fault lines that allow selective exogamy but foreclose most boundary-crossings in a caste-charged matrimonial market.

This market traces itself to colonial India where exigencies of British rule heralded changes remodelling arranged marriages. Matchmaking, traditionally performed by individual matchmakers (*ghataks*) and their female compeers (*ghatakis*), would then be executed by institutionalised organisations that recruited and employed them.<sup>6</sup> If the development of print technology for mass consumption opened newspaper matrimonial columns to 19th-century colonial Bengal, the arrival of the internet a century later revolutionised

<sup>2</sup> Kakar 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Kakar 2007; Uberoi 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Bandyopadhyay 2004; 2014; Chatterjee 1997; 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Non-resident Indians are Indian citizens living outside India due to education, employment, business, or any other purpose indicating an indefinite stay abroad. An individual who spends less than 182 days in India during a financial year (1 April to 31 March) qualify as NRI. NRIs are different from PIOs (Persons of Indian Origin) and OCIs (Overseas Citizen of India). PIO refers to foreign citizens with Indian ancestry. OCI refers to a foreign national who was an Indian citizen or was eligible for Indian citizenship, their descendants and spouses. In this article, I deal only with NRIs.

<sup>6</sup> Majumdar 2009.

matchmaking even further.<sup>7</sup> Where newspaper matrimonial columns enjoyed a broad reach beyond the proximate coteries to which individual matchmakers had access, online matrimonial websites trumpeted a global outreach that transcended national borders. Styled after international dating sites, came online matrimonial portals, new entrants in what would become a round-the-year profitable matchmaking business without any seasonal down-cycle. Shaadi.com debuted in 1996 followed by Bharat Matrimony in 2006; both would go on to dominate India's online matrimonial market. A constellation of other platforms closely followed.

In their approach to matchmaking, online portals twin with newspaper columns and expand options available to spouse-seekers while leaving the foundational commitment to primordial loyalties intact. Together, they create a fertile ground where traditional caste-based choices survive in tandem with more autonomous selection based on new parameters like compatibility and romantic longings.<sup>8</sup> Greater individual choice can be wielded with congruous parental guidance.

However, in their desire to portray themselves as progressive pioneers, families often accept a more muted presence in the selection process.<sup>9</sup> And this portends a paradox stationed at the heart of matchmaking. Families do not retreat from negotiations. Instead, they continue to remain important partners in matchmaking and ensure that their standards of suitable spouses are subtly met, if needed with help from matchmakers with a sprawling control over the marriage market.<sup>10</sup> Companionate marriages steered by individual-oriented spouse selection are encouraged as long as caste restrictions of endogamy, among other criteria, have not been blatantly flouted.<sup>11</sup>

But if caste endogamy is the desired goal, then what does “Caste no Bar” mean? “Caste No Bar” permits inter-caste marriage among upper castes.<sup>12</sup> Prohor's advertisement, for example, maintained caste boundaries. However, in many cases, interested families from castes approximating in rank approach the advertising families. Bengali Matrimony and Brahmin Matrimony (respective specialized regional and caste segments of Bharat Matrimony) brought to Prohor's doorstep 15 profiles of potential brides, 10 Brahmin and 5 Baidya. When *Ananda Bazaar Patrika* and *The Telegraph*, published this advertisement over two successive weeks, the family received proposals from 12 more Brahmin families and three other Baidya families.<sup>13</sup> After 20 weeks of negotiations, two potential brides, Indrani (Brahmin) and Sahithi (Baidya) made the final shortlist. Prohor's family wrapped up

<sup>7</sup> Titzman 2013; Sen 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Kaur and Dhanda 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Gopalkrishnan and Babacan 2007; Bowman and Dollahite 2013; Bhandari 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Bhandari 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Families involved in arranged marriage negotiations whip up a swingeing detail of attributes while matching potential spouses. These include (and are not limited to) skin-complexion, gender roles, ancestral origin, horoscopes, family backgrounds, field of study, level of education, nature of employment, and salary slab. For this article, I am delimiting the discussion to caste preferences in arranged marriages.

<sup>12</sup> Bengal has a different caste structure from the rest of India. Brahmins, Baidyas, and Kayasthas form West Bengal's upper-caste trio. For details, see Bandyopadhyay 2004; see also Sen and Bandyopadhyay 2023. Brahmins occupy the top echelons; Baidyas and Kayasthas follow. Tracing origins to an occupational caste hierarchy, Brahmins were the priests, Baidyas manned the teaching, law, and medical professions, and Kayasthas worked as scribes, clerks, administrators, ministers, and record-keepers. Elsewhere, I have discussed some of the trends of inter-caste marriages among residents of Kolkata. See Sen 2021.

<sup>13</sup> They are Kolkata's leading vernacular and English newspapers, respectively.

arrangements with Indrani. Even when caste restrictions may be marginally eased for a better sense of available choices, final decisions incline towards the higher-caste bride.

Sahithi would soon find a Baidya groom. On a Sunday matrimonial supplement of *The Telegraph*, Ranendra's advertisement ran as: *Baidya (thirty-six) groom, working as a software professional in Vienna. Requires fair, good-looking, educated girl willing to relocate overseas. Caste No Bar*. Ranendra's engineer parents envisaged an upper-caste bride as a daughter-in-law and interacted with 10 upper-caste families – four Brahmin, three Kayastha, and three Baidya (Sahithi's family being one of them). Brahmin families were as hesitant as Ranendra, though upper-caste was lower to them within upper-caste hierarchical arrangements. Along similar premises, Ranendra's parents were in turn less keen on furthering negotiations with the three Kayastha families. Two Namasudra families expressed an initial interest but Ranendra's parents' lukewarm responses deterred further conversation. Negotiations finalised with Sahithi. Matchmaking, as one study reminds us, tends to maintain narrower caste boundaries than may be discerned from explicitly stated preferences in matrimonial advertisements.<sup>14</sup> Claims around "Caste No Bar" essentially sit in this praxis.

Does this obsession with caste change, for instance with economic uplift or educational awareness? Scholars argue that there is no reason to believe that economic growth will undermine caste preferences in matrimony.<sup>15</sup> And it is here that scrutinising NRI matrimony becomes pivotal as it exposes the largely negative correlation either of education or economic growth with any discarding of primordial loyalties. Matrimonial columns of NRIs in US dailies, for example, reflect a notable infatuation with caste.<sup>16</sup> Some lower castes may want to elevate their status by marrying into upper castes, an attitude that is bound to go without reciprocation. The higher one's caste, the less favourably disposed would one be towards boundary-crossing.<sup>17</sup> Again, one study found the education levels of spouses do not have any association with the likelihood of their marriage being inter-caste, but couples with an educated mother of the husband have a significant probability of inter-caste marriage.<sup>18</sup> Examining West Bengal's NRI matrimony, in this context, allows us to navigate twin sets of paradoxes relieving from obscurity those nested complexities that underline match-making. Educational qualifications and coveted employment shape eligible grooms, themselves offsprings of educated middle-class parents professing to represent an ostensible liberal intelligentsia. Not half as progressive as they claim to be, their apparent liberal image is disrobed in the matrimonial market.

Well-established Subinoy and his highly qualified family were looking for a Brahmin bride. An engineer residing in Geneva, Subinoy (Brahmin, aged twenty-nine) decided that his parents were the best matchmakers. When a 5-month live-in relationship with his Australian (Christian) partner ended in a complete disaster, Subinoy was devastated and his parents were delighted. Subinoy's father (retired army officer), mother (school teacher), grandmother (retired professor), two (engineer) aunts, and one elder sister (homemaker) formed a search committee to select Subinoy's bride. A subscription of Bengali Matrimony was quickly purchased and an advertisement hastened its way to *Ananda Bazaar Patrika*.

<sup>14</sup> Banerjee et al. 2013.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Kumar 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Ahuja and Ostermann 2015; Narzary and Ladusingh 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Ray et al. 2020.

The search was difficult. Subinoy's prospective wife would have to be Brahmin, very fair, beautiful, homely, and highly educated. In addition, singing qualities were desirable. The cocktail of essential and desirable criteria conjured for Subinoy's potential bride climaxed the many socially standardised conventions rampant in Bengal's matrimonial market. An obsession with the "fair complexioned bride" runs recurrent in matrimonial columns. "Homely" in the dictionary denotes "lacking in attractiveness"; however, in the matrimonial market, "homely" means "a girl who will stay at home" or if working, possess some proficiency in household chores. Matrimonial negotiations ramp up preferences for brides who can successfully balance both fronts of home and work. In Subinoy's case, when multiple matchmaking services failed to procure a suitable bride, the family relaxed some requirements. "Highly educated" became "well-educated," "very fair" became "fair" and "beautiful" became a pleasing personality. "Homely" was retained. "Singing qualities" were dropped. The caste requirement remained. Then came Simana, a fair and well-educated Brahmin bride. Five months later, the newlywed Brahmin couple flew to Geneva.

The preponderance of caste endogamy is evident in a society where the government initiates monetary benefits to encourage inter-caste marriages.<sup>19</sup> But attempts to breach caste largely miscarry when upper-caste families fiercely fortify caste confines. *Brahmin groom, 35 years, based in the UK on work visa; required fair, educated bride willing to relocate abroad; caste no bar*, summarised the advertisement seeking a suitable bride for Arya, an eligible doctor groom. "My parents (doctor father and mother in teaching profession) prefer Brahmin, Kayastha or Baidya bride," claimed Arya. "I will go with their wishes."<sup>20</sup> Arya's family evinced the complexities and deceptions of *Caste No Bar*. Arya eventually got married to a Kayastha girl, an example of upper-caste exogamy.

His brother, Amit (32) managed to fall in love within caste boundaries. Amit met Soumili (31) while travelling to Helsinki where they completed their education and secured employment. Procedures were simpler when they decided to get married. Both returned to Kolkata and brought their parents together (Amit's parents were engineers, Soumili's father a professor and his mother a homemaker). Three months later, wedding cards announced a marriage between two Kulin Brahmins, Amit Banerjee and Soumili Mukherjee—an alliance approximating Uberoi's concept of "arranged love marriage," where love marriages are arranged, corroborated, and recognised by familial permission.<sup>21</sup>

Circumstances were different for Saikat, a New York-based lecturer, preparing for his second marriage. Saikat's first wedlock with Surangana was an inter-caste love marriage that had discounted elderly advice and disseminated discontent in the highly educated Banerjee household. The Mahishya girl was not remotely acceptable to a conservative, once feudal,

<sup>19</sup> With a promise of 2.50 lakhs Indian Rupee to eligible inter-caste couples, the Dr. Ambedkar Scheme for Social Integration through Inter-Caste Marriages was launched in 2013 under the auspices of the Dr. Ambedkar Foundation (An Autonomous Body under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment). <https://ambedkarfoundation.nic.in/icms.html>. Last Accessed 1 November 2024. Resident inter-caste couples apply through the Social Welfare Department of respective State Governments and Union Territories. With effect from 1 April 2023, the Inter Caste Marriage and Atrocity Schemes of Dr Ambedkar Foundation was merged with the Centrally Sponsored Scheme for implementation of the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 and the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.

<sup>20</sup> Interviewed by author, 23 July 2024.

<sup>21</sup> In West Bengal, Brahmins are further divided and differentiated into sub-groups. Kulin Brahmins feature in the top of this hierarchical ladder with all other Brahmins falling below in caste status. Again, among Kayasthas, some calling themselves "Kulin Kayasthas" claim higher status. Uberoi 1998, 306. Donner 2016; Kakar 2007.

joint family whose aristocratic pride survived amidst waning opulence.<sup>22</sup> The Brahmin family was not against love marriage; if only Saikat could find love within upper-caste boundaries. Since he could not, love, his family decided, would be habitually manufactured in an arranged marriage informed by familial expertise. A Baidya girl was selected. Saikat's parents were satisfied. Saikat's family was pleased. Saikat duly complied.

Saikat's experiences drove his acquiescence. Moulded by affective ties, marriages remain concerns of family, extended family, neighbourhood, friends, family-friends, and the list continues. Grooms are largely reluctant to transgress restrictions which would mean interrupting some indelible bonds entrenched in value-loaded familial relationships. Considerations around "What would my neighbours think?" or "What would the extended family think?," guide the choice of partners.<sup>23</sup> Subinoy, for example, was well aware that his live-in partner may not be acceptable to his parents. Subinoy's relationship failed more due to busy lifestyles and as both Subinoy and Saikat claimed, for "lack of compatibility," which both partners realised with time.<sup>24</sup> Saikat's and Subinoy's circumstances principally stimulated a conviction of the futility of relationships unescorted by parental consent. One survey in Kolkata found brides and grooms taking cognizance of the fact that falling in love and romantic marriages were fine as long as they received parental approval, a prelude to Amit's relationship with Soumili finding marital fruition.<sup>25</sup> By these standards, NRI grooms demonstrate complicity in caste adherence and conformity with familial decisions.

Kolkata's arranged marriages, one scholar argued, are often based on an expanded caste circle that delimits marriages within redefined boundaries expressed through state-designated "general castes."<sup>26</sup> This expanded caste circle is best reflected in the matrimonial market as "Caste No Bar." Caste was not a bar in Brahmin Saikat's marriage to a Baidya girl. Caste was also not a bar in Brahmin Arya's marriage to a Kayastha girl. But Prohor's family's pronounced preference for Indrani over Sahithi, her marriage with Ranendra and his marital deliberations showed caste as a bar even among upper-castes. Caste became an acute bar in Saikat's first marriage to a Mahishya girl. Even if caste may not be a bar in some marriages among upper-castes, it can be a bar in conjugality among groups occupying the top echelons of the hierarchical gradation and it is a bar in alliances with those outside the upper-caste trio.

Matrimonial preferences in arranged marriages invoke discriminatory practices where caste rarely shows any decline in educational awareness or economic advances of either the grooms or their parents. Despite being geographically distant from the parent state, NRIs take cultural prejudices with them and maintain caste biases in marital negotiations. Upper-caste Bengali NRI matrimony presents this demonstrable mobility of caste beyond borders. Arranged marriages among NRIs buttress caste practices where most grooms are

<sup>22</sup> Mahishyas are a diverse middle (predominantly agrarian) caste of Bengal.

<sup>23</sup> Donner 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Interviewed by author, 12 June 2024 and 1 August 2024. By "lack of compatibility," both Subinoy and Saikat meant the inability of adjustments as well as a very different outlook towards life. To delimit the scope of this article, I am leaving aside discussions of conjugal life.

<sup>25</sup> Mukhopadhyay 2012.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* The Indian Government follows the policy of Protective Discrimination. General Castes indicate a conglomeration of the unreserved upper castes while "Scheduled Castes" refer to the erstwhile Dalits of Untouchable Castes, who now come within the ambit of reservation. Some middle castes also come under "General Castes," but in terms of traditional caste hierarchy, they remain outside the upper-caste trio.



largely disinclined to transgress customary caste frontiers. They keep caste alive, sustain its transnational relevance and proliferate its invidious impacts on a global terrain.

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