

# Inter-caste Marriage in Eastern Nepal: Context and Its Consequences

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This study explores the current situation of inter-caste marriage in Eastern Nepal. It is based on a sample of 30 inter-caste couples collected in Sunsari District. It basically describes the extent and pattern of inter-caste marriage and responsible factors to be engaged in inter-caste marriage among diverse social groups. Inter-caste marriage is not only a matter of individual relation; it is also a matter of society and social transformation from traditional to modern. Love and affection, age factors, good moral character of the lower caste, modernization, migration, education, mass media, and identity based moments are taken major motivational factors for inter-caste marriage. Inter-caste couples are victimized from various factors of traditional society; they are facing different kinds of problems from their family, relatives, and society. Family problems, social problems, cultural problems, and psychological problems are the common for them.

*Keywords:* caste, inter-caste marriage, endogamy, hyper gamy, hypo gamy

## Introduction

Social stratification is the ordering of social differences with the help of a set of criteria or just a single criterion which ties the differentiated strata into a system (Gupta, 2000). Caste groups are closed social groups: One may only marry within one's caste (Quigley, 1999), also called endogamous marriage. As Dumont (1980) explained, endogamy is essential to the caste system and to caste identity because of the caste system, regulation of hierarchy through ritual pollution and purity. In other words, caste hierarchy is maintained through endogamous marriage or the marriage within (sub-caste) groups in this system (Kansakar & Ghimire, 2008). In this sense, inter-caste marriage poses challenge to the orthodox of caste primarily because it brings to exclusive and endogamous sub-caste groups in relationship, creates kinship, and gives a comparable social position.

Caste is a form of social stratification characterized by endogamy, hereditary transmission of a lifestyle which often includes occupation, ritual status in a hierarchy, and customary social interaction and exclusion based on cultural notion of purity and pollution. As Dumont (1980) explained, endogamy is essential to the caste system and to caste identity because of the caste system regulation of hierarchy through ritual pollution and purity. But Dumont's notion was criticized as it failed to explain the social change, dynamism, and individualistic strivings (that can and does take place) even within the orthodox Hindu way to living. Berreman (1972) criticized the Dumont's notion that power and economic factors are distinct and epiphenomenal to caste.

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In Nepal the system of caste is still a predominant system of social stratification and inequality. The 1854 legal code prescribed severe punishment for hypogamy. Caste plays a very important role in the selection of mates in marriage. But, nowadays, there are increases in the trend of inter-caste marriage in the society. The urban residence, education, employment in modern occupation, and middle class economic background have tended to be set of attributes affecting the incidence of inter-caste marriage. Inter-caste married couples are looked upon as social deviants and usually punished for rejecting the prevalent norms of society.

Marriage is considered as a social, religious, spiritual, and/or legal union of individuals. It is an institution in which interpersonal relationships (usually intimate and sexual) are acknowledged by the state by religious authority of both society and state. Marriage is a central family process in Nepal, as it is in many other countries of the world (Bennett, 1983; Frick, 1986; Watkins, 1996). Marriage in Nepal historically has been under the strict control of the family (Barber, 2004). An individual's family decides when and whom he or she would marry (Folmar, 1992). Inter-caste marriage (ICM) is a marriage between spouses of different ethnicities and castes. It is related to exogamy, where marriage is allowed only outside of a social group and opposed to endogamous. Inter-caste marriage has been perceived as one of the most practical ways to blur caste lines and render them irrelevant (Wax, 2008). It is also considered as the means of social inclusion as it helps increase inter-caste cooperation and integration between Dalits and non-Dalits (NPC, 2007). There are debates and dissensions among Dalits and non-Dalits scholars regarding the nature and impact of incentives on the inter-caste couple (Biswakarma, 2013).

Normally, inter-caste marriage means the marriage of two people from different caste groups. However, the general convention of inter-caste marriage usually denotes the marriage between Dalits and non-Dalits in Nepal. Nevertheless, in this dissertation, the author has attempted to define inter-caste marriage not only as the marriage between Dalits and non-Dalits, but as a union of male and female from two distinct castes and ethnic groups. In this context, the focus of this study is to analyze the extent and pattern of inter-caste marriage. Especially, this study was guided for seeking answers to the following research question:

- (1) What are the extent and pattern of inter-caste marriage among diverse social groups?
- (2) What are the factors that are responsible to be engaged in inter-caste marriage among diverse social groups?
- (3) What types of problems are faced by inter-caste couple after their marriage?
- (4) How is the practice of inter-caste marriage contributing toward transforming caste relation?

### **Materials and Methods**

This study is based on urban area of Eastern Development Region. Itahari is a beautiful and multicultural town of Eastern Nepal. It lies on Sunsari District and Koshi Zone. The units of analysis of this study are hypergamous and hypogenous couples. A total of 30 couples were purposively selected as respondents for this study; because of the small sample size and the non-feasibility of random sampling, the study basically used qualitative methods with in-depth interview of interview of inter-caste married couples.

This study entertains both primary as well as secondary data. The primary data have been collected from the field through in-depth interview, based on checklist, case study, and key-informant interview. The data were analyzed in qualitative ways. Qualitative data were analyzed by using thematic analysis based on key-research question. A good thematic code is one that captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon. It is usable in the analysis, the interpretation, and presentation of research (Boyatzis, 1998).

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Situation of the Inter-caste Marriage**

The national population census report 2012 has identified 125 caste/ethnic groups and 10 religious groups in Nepal (CBS, 2012). Inter-caste married couples were categorized into different 10 social groups as per the definition of the CBS: Pahadi, Madhesi Dalit, Pahadi Bahun, Chhetri/Takuri, Pahadi Janajati, Madhesi, Bahun/Chhetri (B/C), Madhesi middle caste, Mulim (religious groups), and others (Dashnami). This study interviewed with 30 couples. Among them 16 couples were hypogamous (low caste male marrying with high caste female) and 14 couples were hypergamous (high caste male marrying with low caste female) couples. They were studied comparatively. Hypogamous marriage is increasing more than hypergamous marriage. The reason behind this is if a low caste man marries a high caste girl, his family will easily accept them, whereas if a high caste male marries a low caste girl, his family will reject them and will not permit them to stay at home. Therefore, hypogamous marriage was found more in numbers than the hypergamous one in the study area.

### **Social Groups and Inter-caste Marriage**

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### **Religious Background of Inter-caste Couples**

This study explores the situation of inter-caste marriage with lower caste from the religious perspective. In this study, in terms of religion, 20 (66.6%) husbands were Hindus, six (20%) were Christian, and four (13.3%) were Muslim; there were no Buddhist. Similarly, 19 (63.3%) wives were Hindus, four (13.3%) were Christians, and one (3.3%) was Muslim. After inter-caste marriage, six (20%) wives changed their religion and adopted their husbands' religion. According to the religions belief, the data show that inter-caste marriage is high among the Hindus, followed by in the Christians and in the Muslim.

### **Educational Status and Inter-caste Marriage**

Overall literacy rate (for population aged five years and above) of Nepal has increased from 54.1 percent in 2001 to 65.9 percent in 2011. Male literacy rate is 75.1 percent compared to female literacy rate of 57.4 percent. This highest literacy rate is reported in Kathmandu district (86.3%) and lowest (47.8%) in Humla (CBS, 2011). Data on educational status of couples showed that most of the couples in hypogamy were concentrated at lower secondary, secondary, intermediate, and bachelor level education and there was higher percentage of educated men (bachelor level) in hypergamy than in hypogamy, in hypergamy although there was higher percentage of women with primary level education. In case of hypogamy, there was higher

concentration of women in secondary level and the number of women with intermediate and bachelor level was also significant (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Level of Education of Hypergamous and Hypogamous Couples*

Level of education	Hypergamy				Hypogamy			
	No. of men	Percent	No. of women	Percent	No. of men	Percent	No. of women	Percent
Illiterate	1	7.14	1	7.14	1	6.25	2	12.50
Primary	1	7.14	5	35.71	3	18.75	2	12.50
L. Secondary	1	7.14	2	14.28	3	18.75	2	12.50
Secondary	3	21.42	3	21.42	3	18.75	5	31.23
Intermediate	2	14.28	1	7.14	2	12.50	2	12.50
Bachelor	5	35.71	1	7.14	4	25.00	2	12.50
Master	1	7.14	1	7.14	-	-	1	6.25
Total	14	100.00	14	100.00	16	100.00	16	100.00

*Note.* Source: Field Study, 2016.

### Responsible Factors of Inter-caste Marriage

Inter-caste marriages that are not arranged by the families eventually counter against capitalist values of wealth, power, and status. According to Baraili (2005), marriage in Nepal are controlled by property, religion, casteism, social customs, and traditions and they are feudalistic in nature and individual decision and independent marriages are not tolerated. Inter-caste married couples are often taken as social deviants and usually punished for rejecting the prevalent norms of the society. Some couples may be barred from the participation in normal activities in family and society while other couples may be deprived of social relation. Of course, there are certain factors that are responsible for inter-caste marriage. Some major factors informed by the couples and key informants are highlighted here and these factors are categorized as internal and external factors.

#### Internal Factors

Internal factors denote the self-feeling and concept of person who is willing to marry with low caste without influence of outsiders. One's own self interest, need, and desire are found important in the inter-caste marriage. These factors are follows:

(1) Love and affection: Love and affection is one of the major factors of inter-caste marriage; without love and attraction, no one can imagine inter-caste marriage. Since the parents give their son or daughter marriage beyond their traditional caste barriers can hardly be imagined in Nepali society;

(2) Age factor: Age factor also determines the inter-caste marriage. Majority of the couples are found to have fallen in love during their teenage. Teenage is itself an age of attraction with opposite sex, moreover, the teenagers do not have any family and social burden. They are ideal rather practical. Their emotionality ideology and self thought drive towards the relationship with their colleagues or friends;

(3) Good moral character, honesty and sincerity of lower caste youth: The high caste girls who married with low caste informed that they were highly beloveds. The non-Dalit girls were thus impressed with the Dalit boy whom they knew as having good moral character, honesty, and sincerity. Due to such characters, they impressed and fell in love and finally they had married.

### External Factors

Unlike personal cause, there is also the external factor, which is directly playing the role for motivating to inter-caste marriage. Capitalism and mode of production is changing the form of marriages: New people are beginning to feel more comfortable with the love marriage (Mishra, 2010). For the purpose of this study, the factors appearing at the global arena and at the broader macro level are considered external ones.

(1) Modernization, westernization, and sanskritization: Modernization westernization, and sanskritization have its influence on the culture and life style of people. Especially new generation has adopted the western culture, such as dressing up, listening English music, eating and seating, making boy/girl friends, etc. A few scholars have addressed the issue of inter-caste relations and intermarriage between high caste group and Janajatis within the frameworks of the modernization and sanskritization thesis (Sharma, 1977). The modernization thesis generally views intermarriages positively since intermixing and intermarriage are taken to be signs of the crumbling caste system, the remnant of “traditional” society. Moreover, implicit in the sanskritization thesis is the assumption that intermarriage is a manifestation of the “desire” on the part of lower castes to upgrade their caste status. In this formulation, intermarriage is thought of as having beneficial consequences for “national culture” and integration;

(2) Migration and new social relation: Migration of people such as those from hill to Tarai and rural to urban is also found to be playing the crucial role for inter-caste marriage. People, who come from the hill to Tarai, need to make good relationship with native people. During this course, they do not know each other in detail. They have to get and give support, later they become the intimate neighbor;

(3) Changing pattern on caste-based occupation: In Nepali society occupation also becomes the matter of prestige still they acquire no dignity out of their caste based traditional occupation according to Nepali culture. Those Dalits who are continuing their caste based occupation as ironsmith, cobbler, and tailor are perceived as low profile jobs and they are facing more discrimination compared to those Dalits who are not involved in their caste based occupation when Dalits give their occupation, the relationship like master and servant also ends;

(4) Modern education: Education is a key to reducing spread of inequality. In Nepal, lower caste educational status is increasing compared to past days. Their school enrollment is increasing in recent days. Due to the enrollment in school and college, they can interact with higher caste and have friendship with them. Additionally, educated Dalits have more possibility to inter-caste marriage with non-Dalits;

(5) New social movement: A social movement a collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interactions with elites opponents and authorities (Tarrow, 1944). In recent days in Nepal, new social movement is increasing in every part of the society. Dalits movement is increasing in every part of the society. Dalits movement, ethnic movement, feminist movement, and other movement for equality and freedom are also motivating youth in inter-caste marriage. More importantly, while they are tortured and are forced to separate, the inter-caste couple can get moral and legal support from these organizations, which are working for human rights and justice. These also are the external factors, which motivate people for inter-caste marriage;

(6) Mass media: Mass media have been playing a vital role to gear up the pace of modern development and to accelerate the speed of well-cultured and aptly civilized human society. In recent years, people’s access is increasing in media. Numbers of print media, TV channel, and FM radio also are increasing in recent days. Due to the accessibility on media and its impact, people’s awareness level is increasing. People not only

become aware on human rights, gender right, personal freedom, and so on, but they (especially youth) are also influenced by entertainment programs, such as music, cinema, and love story. Due to this, youth are more motivated to have friend with opposite sex from different caste.

### Problems Faced by Inter-caste Couples

#### Family Problem

Inter-caste married couples did not receive family support. But they have sought support and solidarity beyond one's own kith and kinds-with NGOs, civil society groups, community based organization, and so on. Some have adopted brothers, sisters, natal family maternal uncles and aunts. Inter-caste marriage usually follows no consent from the family and parents. As soon as the boy and a girl fly away to get married, the couple family, as was found, make effort to find out their whereabouts. Sometimes, the parents easily get information and sometimes they do not; as soon as they know that their children have committed and inter-caste marriage, the parents, usually from non-Dalit family, try to break the relationship with Dalit. Registering the cases with the false charges, such as kidnapping, thieving, child marriage, rapes found the common practice in this regard. While asked whether their marriage was accepted or not by non-Dalits, only five (26.31%) out of 19 couples (including hypergamous and hypogamous) said that they were accepted whereas eight (42.1%) informed that they were not accepted. Similarly, 31.57 percent were partially accepted (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Accepted of Inter-caste Marriage by Non-Dalit Family (Between Dalit and non-Dalit)*

Response	Frequency	Percent
Accepted	5	26.31
Not accepted	8	42.1
Partially accepted	6	31.57
Total	19	100.0

*Note.* Source: Field Study, 2016.

In case of intermarriage (between high caste and Janajati) and inter-religious marriage (between Muslim and Hindu), there were 100 percent couples had said they were accepted their marriage by their parents. If in marriage women accepted the Islam religion, there would be no serious problem for the Muslim to accept inter-caste marriage.

#### Social Problem

Marriage is not only a contract between the individuals but also between two families and their alliance linked through kinship networks (Nishimura, 1998). So the acknowledgement of the couple from relatives, friends, and neighbors is an important part of social relations. Their acknowledgement includes occasional visits and invitations during festivals and religious activities, marital and other family functions, etc. Inter-caste married couples face societal exclusion when societal attitude and behavior are negative towards them due to caste factor. The woman isolation is found higher in hypergamous marriage and isolation is one of the most painful manifestations of the domestic violence perpetrated against them. It makes a women feel that she is emotionally and socially alone, economically constrained, and culturally disconnected. This feeling and fact of not belonging are reflected in the women's poor relationship with her spouse and her lack of social interaction

with the extended family, friends, and the community.

### **Cultural Problem**

In inter-caste marriage, majority of brides were facing adjustment problems. Particularly, in the case of hypogamy, non-Dalit women who were living with their husband's family had adjustment problem because of the different culture and their socialization process. The inter-caste married couples have faced various problems in the society culturally where they have been excluded in cultural activities. Even the priest has not visited their home in their cultural activities. As if the priests come, they have gone with fasting.

### **Physical and Mental Torture**

Mostly, hypogamous couples suffered either physical or mental torture from the non-Dalit family, if their marriage was not accepted by the bride's side. To separate their daughter from Dalit husband, the non-Dalit family gave physical torture to couple, if non-Dalit family found the couple after marriage; they expressed anger by attacking the groom and sometimes the bride. If the couple were out of their contact, parents tried to torture the couple by threatening through phone or sending messages through a familiar person. However, these types of situations also depended on the socio-economic status of the family.

### **Who Helps to Inter-caste Marriage?**

Inter-caste marriage is not only the concern of family. It is also a matter for society too. The acceptance and rejection of marriage by particular family are determined by the social perception and behavior to the family and couple as well. With each other in the society to accomplish the task is important. Inter-caste marriage is a challenge and the more challenge is to be settled in the family, neighbors, relatives, friends, and society with compulsory help. The respondents were asked whether they got any support in their marriage period. Act of 30 respondents, 43.33 percent respondent said that they got support from friends. Likewise, 26.66 percent respondents were not able to get any support from anyone whereas 13.33 percent couples were helped by family members and 10 percent got support from neighborhood. Only 6.66 percent couples were helped by relatives.

Table 3

#### *Who Helped Couple When They Married?*

Response	No. of couple	Percent
Family member	4	13.33
Neighborhood	3	10.00
Relatives	2	6.66
Friends	13	43.33
No anyone	8	26.66
Total	30	100.00

*Note.* Source: Field Study, 2016.

### **Impact of Inter-caste Marriage to Reduce Caste Discrimination**

According to the couples, inter-caste marriage would help to slave caste based discrimination because if their son/daughter married with a lover caste, they believed that high caste would stop to discriminate to low caste whether they accepted marriage or not. Some so-called high caste families were ready to accept low caste as their son or daughter-in-law but they cannot dare because of social prestige and relatives pressures. They

used to meet out of the village. After a long time (more than decade), high caste is ready to accept low caste as their son-in-law/daughter-in-law.

Among the responded, 60 percent couples believed that inter-caste marriage helps to reduce caste based discrimination, whereas 10 percent did not believe so, likewise 23.33 percent couple believed that it could not help to reduce caste based discrimination. 6.66 percent couple said they do not know about such impact (see Table 4). Majority of couples had confidence that caste based discrimination would come to an end due to the inter-caste marriage. While few numbers of couples (10 percent) believed it would never happen. Those couple, who frequently got torture and were forced to leave their village, had such types of opinion. Likewise, some couples could not find any difference before and after marriage.

Table 4

*Impact of Marriage to Reduce Caste Discrimination*

Impact of marriage	Frequency	Percent
Helping to reduce caste discrimination	18	60.00
Helping to increase caste discrimination	3	10.00
Not different (same)	7	23.33
Do not know	2	6.66
Total	30	100.00

*Note.* Source: Field Study, 2016.

## Conclusion

Caste system is a dynamic concept endogamy and hierarchy is the main features of caste system. As Dumont (1980) explained, endogamy is essential to the caste system and to caste identity because of the caste system, regulation of hierarchy through ritual pollution and purity. Hutton (1946) described a functional view of caste system for individual members, community functions, and function for the state and society as a whole. Berreman (1967) argued that caste is a peculiar institution with peculiar consequences. Love and affection, age factor, and good moral character of lower caste youth are taken major inspiring factors for inter-caste marriage. Likewise, modernization, and sanskritization, migration, education, identity based movement, mass media, and political ideology are some of the external factors of inter-caste marriage. Both the factors are crucial for the change of dogmatic social structure. Inter-caste couples are victimized from various factors of traditional society. They are facing different kinds of problems from their family, relatives, and society, Family problems, social problems, cultural problems, and psychological problems are the common for them. Though, the marriage between so-called upper Caste and Janjati is taken commonly from the family and society. But, the marriage between Dalit and non-dalit is not accepted by family and society. The main factor of this kind of gap is caste hierarchy (untouchability) and caste based social prestige and power. In a nutshell, inter-caste marriage can be seen as one of the major factors against caste discrimination. There is a great possibility of ending of tradition caste system from the Nepali society on the condition of acceptance of inter-caste marriage.

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