

URBAN HIERARCHIES IN FLUX: ARRANGED INTERCASTE MARRIAGES IN CALCUTTA

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'Nowadays all castes among Hindus are equal' was the most common statement about caste I heard during my fieldwork in a working class neighborhood in Calcutta. People also put their disregard for caste differences into practice, and intercaste marriages were common in this neighborhood, which I will call by a pseudonym, Kalipara. Yet, they have not completely abandoned hierarchical considerations, for even most of the intercaste marriages are arranged, and people spend considerable sums of money for dowries and marriage arrangements. In this article¹, I examine this seemingly unconventional practice of arranged intercaste marriages as well as the insights it offers into the nature of the intertwining between two sets of hierarchies: caste and class.

The idea of arranged intercaste marriages is unconventional because arranged marriages generally entail caste considerations; they are about the construction of caste hierarchy. *Jāti*, a subcaste in Bengal, is ideally an endogamous unit, and recent ethnographies confirm the prevalence of caste endogamy in rural Bengal (Lieten 1992; Fruzzetti 1990; Davis 1983). Yet, as Fruzzetti, Östör, and Barnett (1992) have illustrated, North Indian marriage practices do not follow Dumont's all-Indian theory of marriage alliances and hierarchy whereby in-marrying women pass in closed circles of a stratified system. In Bengal, the purity and status of the line are maintained through marriages to equal or better houses within *jātis*, but there are no simple rules as to whom one can give or from whom one can take women within the *jāti* (subcaste).

Instead of predefined general categories, a system of hierarchy derives from indigenous kinship constructs and the understanding of conception. In Bengal, *gotra* is an exogamous subgroup of an endogamous *jāti* (subcaste) which refers to a common ancestral figure. *Gotra* is a symbol which differs from blood (*rakta*); it designates a broad category of male linked relationships. After marriage, women join the husband's *gotra*, continue the husband's line, but maintain their father's

¹ I am thankful to the participants of the seminar on Changing Patterns of Family and Kinship in India held in Helsinki in May 1998 for their comments and questions which helped me to develop the paper.

blood. For instance, a married woman's observance of the pollution period of both her father's death and the death of a member of her husband's family member's death indicates that women maintain their father's *rakta*. In marriage transactions, lines are matched according to blood quality and purity. In marriages, the units of hierarchical action are defined in relation to each other, and the result is a system of hierarchy consisting of units of equivalence and difference. (Fruzzetti, Östör & Barnett 1992; Fruzzetti & Östör 1976: 115-116.)

Dumont (1980) analyzed caste as an indigenous ideological and cultural system, leaving open the questions of what happens to caste in urban situations and whether low castes perceive caste and symbolize the way high castes do. The general view is that the importance of caste in marriage is diminishing, although studies on urban marriage practices are few. Molund's (1988) and Vatuk's (1972) studies on urban neighborhoods illustrate that caste endogamy can be maintained in urban areas. Molund studied a scheduled caste and working class neighborhood in the city of Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh in the 1970s and found that the predominant norm was to marry within one's subcaste. Vatuk, who studied a middle class neighborhood in the city of Meerut in Uttar Pradesh in the 1960s, did not find a single intercaste arranged marriage.

Discussion about the relationships between hierarchically low and high groups, largely inspired by the debate on Homo Hierarchicus, has overemphasized imitation and the hegemony of the dominant group. Srinivas's (1952) influential concept, *sanskritization*², presents imitation of the pure life style of the higher castes as the lower castes' means of raising their position in the hierarchy. In line with Srinivas, Moffat (1979) argues that low castes have two options: to either imitate higher castes or deny the caste system. Kolenda (1992) was among the first to doubt the unidirectionality of the emulation models, and Khare's (1984) pioneering study on Chamars argued that untouchables are able to construct positive cultural ideologies. In this article, my aim is to examine how urban working class and low caste people perceive and construct social hierarchies by examining their marriage practices.

² Bourdieu's view of lower classes' chances to rise in hierarchy by gaining cultural capital is a French version of *sanskritization*. According to Bourdieu (1989: 395), the working classes are so dominated that they cannot create any true counter-culture.

A MULTI CASTE, WORKING CLASS NEIGHBORHOOD

I carried out fieldwork in Kalipara during 1993-1994 for a period of ten months. Although the focus of my research was on gender and work (Tenhunen 1997)³, I observed caste considerations as practiced in daily life and asked questions on caste as part of in-depth interviews with 34 people.

Kalipara is a relatively new neighborhood, whose residents have immigrated from different regions of Bengal. Up until the 1970s, the area remained an urban periphery with fields and cattle on the southern border between Calcutta city and the Calcutta Metropolitan Area. Since then, the owners of the land have either sold their land or built mud huts to rent out. Only seven per cent (N=584) of the residents were born in Kalipara, 35% in other parts of Calcutta, 28% in Bangladesh, seventeen per cent in West Bengal and five per cent elsewhere.

Compared with the rest of Calcutta, Kalipara is predominantly a scheduled caste neighborhood. According to the 1991 census, the proportion of scheduled castes in Calcutta was six per cent, while the proportion of scheduled castes in Kalipara was 52% (fig. 1).

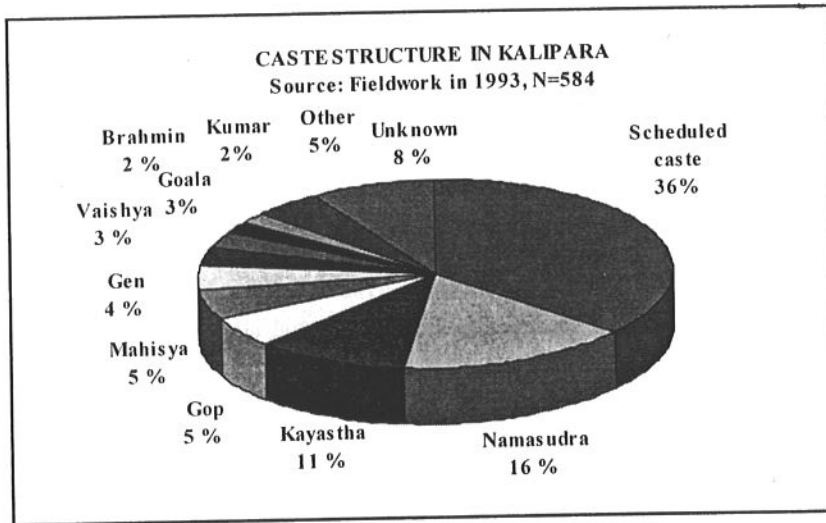


Fig. 1. Caste structure in Kalipara.

³ The main research material consists of life history interviews with 50 women and ten men and a household census of 200 households. The research was funded by the University of Helsinki, Academy of Finland, The Graduate School of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, and by the Finnish Cultural Foundation.

The Indian government classifies economically and socially disadvantaged groups as scheduled castes and tribes for whom state governments maintain quotas in the administration and universities. Scheduled castes are generally regarded as low castes. The majority of the people interviewed in Kalipara have chosen to report their caste as scheduled without naming the caste title. They may not want to be identified with their low caste titles. However, a great number of those who belong to Namashudras, also classified as scheduled castes, have identified themselves as Namashudras. The Namashudras initiated a social movement at the end of the 19th century to improve their status and have a reputation as an upwardly mobile caste (Sarma 1980: 120-121; Bandyopadhyay 1994). Sixteen per cent of the population of Kalipara belong to high castes: Brahmins, Vaishyas, and Kayasthas. The rest belong to various lower caste groups which in the past were associated with their caste occupations: Kumars as potters, Goalas and Gops as milk sellers and Mahisyas as cultivators. In pre-colonial India, each caste was associated with a certain occupation. Caste groups and neighborhoods exchanged services with each other, and caste structured the village economy (Bose 1959: 18-19). The hierarchical status of caste and occupational groups depended on the distance each group was able to maintain from polluting physiological processes. For instance barbering, washing clothes, sweeping, manufacturing of leather goods, and disposal of dead animals are considered low caste work.

The intertwining of caste and occupation today is based on a principal which differs from the reciprocity of castes in pre-colonial Bengal. In Kalipara, caste demarcates the line between those who have regular salaried income and those who get their livelihood from casual labor. Kayastha and Brahmin men dominate in white collar occupations but not all men in white collar occupations belong to higher castes.

Men's occupational structure in Kalipara does not appreciably differ from the figures on the occupational structure of *bāstīs* (dwelling areas classified as slums by the city authorities) in Calcutta published by CMDA in 1981 (Roy 1994). The majority of the inhabitants earn their living from casual labor (figs. 2 & 3). Besides daily laborers, I have classified ricksha drivers, carpenters, electricians, and men in other service occupations as casual labor. They are wage workers in the sense that they receive a fixed payment for their labor and do not exert much control over the labor process, although some ricksha drivers own their vehicles. Whether a ricksha driver owns his vehicle or not, he conforms to the rules of ricksha stands, where rickshas wait in line for the customers and charge their customers according to fixed rates. 24% of men are self-employed in small scale business and selling products such as saris, vegetables, fruits, fish, and snacks.

Twelve per cent of men are white collar workers who form an influential minority in Kalipara. As they live in a *bāstī* area and especially because they live in

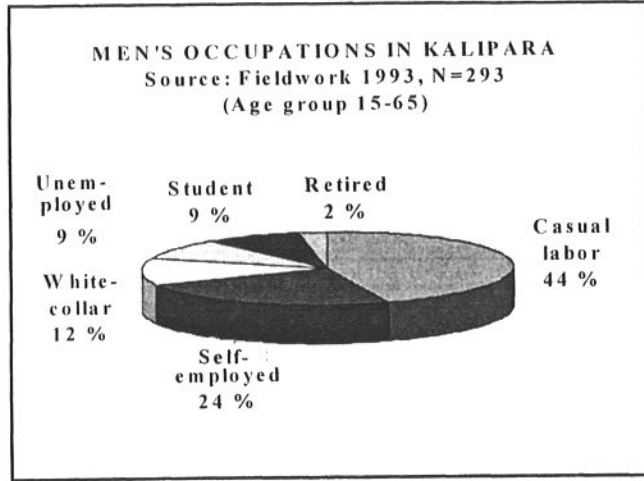


Fig. 2. Men's occupations in Kalipara

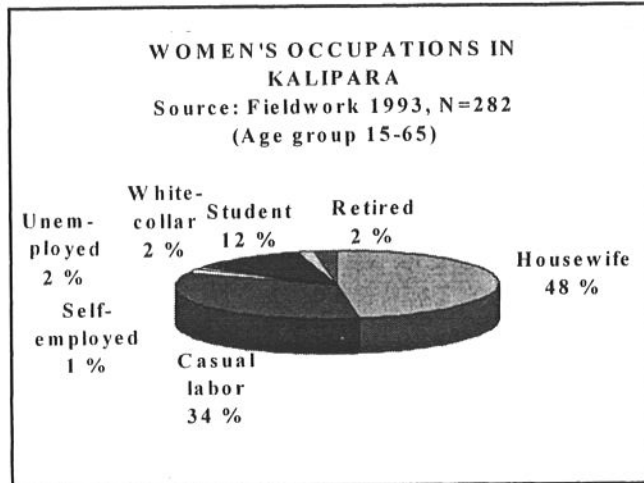


Fig. 3. Women's occupations in Kalipara

mud houses, they would not be considered as middle class in Calcutta. Nevertheless, their life style is in a contrast to the living style of the casual laborers. The crucial difference is that while casual workers often face at least temporary periods of unemployment, the white collar workers enjoy the security of a monthly salary. Moreover, unlike the salaried employees, casual laborers and vendors have no prospects for a pension in old age nor security if they fall ill. The only wage work women married to men in white collar occupations do is wage work at home. Women restrain from working outside the home, and men do not participate in household chores, whereas in many lower caste families men help their wives and mothers in household chores. Women's work participation rate in Kalipara is notably higher than in the rest of Calcutta. In Kalipara, 35% of the total female

population works, while the census figure for Calcutta was in 1991 seven per cent.⁴ Women's most common occupations are wage work at home (fifteen per cent), domestic servant (eleven per cent) and laborer (eight per cent).

CASTE, CLASS, AND MARRIAGE

Most marriages in Kalipara are arranged (*dekhāsunā kare biye*, 'marriage through arrangement' or *sāmājik biye*, 'social marriage'); in Kalipara marriages are called arranged if they refer to marriages involving gift giving from the bride's side to the groom's side and if they are arranged by guardians or in co-operations with the guardians (usually the parents of the couple). The rare alternative is love marriage (*bhālabāsā kare biye*, 'marriage through love'), for which people often use the English word love or say: 'We got married that way.' (*āmrā ie kore biye karechi.*) Women who have become acquainted with their husbands before marriage are often embarrassed to confess this. Love marriages are considered shameful, and many parents, at least initially, object to love marriages. Yet, the neighborhood of Kalipara does not reject people who have entered love marriage in the way they do, according to Fruzzetti (1990: 11) in Vishnupur, a small town in West Bengal. There parents of the offending couple are pressured into barring the couples' visits to the parents' house.

Marriages which are love marriages in the sense that the bride and groom became acquainted before the marriage are considered arranged if they are arranged in cooperation with the couples' guardians. For instance, a couple who had met each other during their high school years had to wait twelve years before marrying because the groom had to fulfill the requirements of the bride's parents. They had approved of the marriage on condition that the groom would find a permanent job before marrying their daughter.

Couples generally go to the main Kālī temple in Calcutta for marriage rituals if neither the bride's nor the groom's house is arranging the ceremony. Out of fifty women I interviewed, two were married against their parents' will and in the Kālī temple. Priests perform marriages in return for small fees in the temple, and these marriages do not require a marriage dinner or showing off the marriage gifts. As love marriages usually offend the kin groups, only a few relatives or friends come to witness the ceremony.

Caste was not a topic people generally discussed, and I attempted to approach the subject in an unobtrusive way by first asking whether the person interviewed approves of intercaste marriages. The following answers and comments to the question of whether caste should be considered in marriage arrangements exemplify the general attitude towards caste in Kalipara.

⁴ It is a generally agreed fact that census figures underestimate women's work participation in India.

- In the past, it was a different thing, but nowadays all people are the same (*ek*).
- I do not discriminate between castes. Besides Muslims, any caste would do.
- Nowadays I do not care about caste. I do not discriminate between castes. I do not because nowadays nobody pays attention to caste. People only note that the prospective groom earns well, has a permanent job... The one who earns well is the best person to marry regardless of his caste.

Next I asked whether anyone in his/her kin group had married outside their caste. Of the people I addressed questions on caste, 25 out of 34 assured me that they do not care about caste when arranging marriages. Seventeen mentioned that intercaste marriages had taken place in their family. Seven people said that they themselves had entered into an intercaste marriage, nine people confirmed that their marriage took place within their caste, and the rest did not specify the nature of their own marriage. It is probable that many of those who were silent about their own marriage had entered into an intercaste marriage. At least one family gave me two versions about the occurrence of intercaste marriages within the family: while an unmarried daughter said that up the present day, no one in her family had entered into an intercaste marriage, her mother, belonging to the Namashudra caste, gave a detailed account of how her eldest daughter married into a higher caste. The information based on my interviews probably underestimates the occurrence of intercaste marriages in the community.

Kalipara residents had different opinions about the acceptability of intercaste marriages; yet, everybody agreed that compared with the past, intercaste marriages have become more common. The increasing practice of arranging intercaste marriages differs drastically from Vatuk's (1972) and Molund's (1988) observations in urban Uttar Pradesh, where they did not find arranged intercaste marriages. I do not suggest that urbanism could entail a uniform culture and way of life, but the different results may be partly explained by the fact that Vatuk and Molund studied more settled, older and more homogenous neighborhoods than Kalipara.

In Kalipara, castes were depicted as groups with shared ways of life, and the disapproval of intercaste marriages was explained by difficulties in adapting to the way of life of other castes. Questions of one's caste often led to lively discussions on the different status of the same caste titles in different locations. For instance, depending on the origins of the kin group, the family title Das can indicate a lower or higher caste status. Unlike the urban neighborhood in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, studied by Vatuk (1972), the residents of Kalipara did not generally return to their native village to find suitable marriage partners. For the slight majority of Kalipara residents who had immigrated from Bangladesh (28% of the population of Kalipara) or were born in Calcutta (35% of the population of Kalipara), going back to villages for finding suitable marriage partners was not a viable option although native areas can be considered in marriage arrangements even without going back to

native villages. However, for most people the native villages of brides and grooms were a secondary consideration in marriage arrangements. Most immigrants in Kalipara are faced with a situation in which they have to choose brides and grooms outside their native villages, and this makes it impossible to follow caste endogamy strictly. The local nature of caste statuses complicates caste considerations in urban settings where people come from different origins; immigration pressures and inspires people to experiment with caste in marriage arrangements.

DOWRIES AND UPWARD MOBILITY

I heard Kalipara residents evaluate each other's position according to the status of the families into which the daughters have been married; the aim of most marriage arrangements is to marry daughters into houses which have been able to adapt features of upper class living styles and standards. The ideal groom not only has a permanent job or good income, but he should also live in a cemented house and come from a family with a good reputation. People in Kalipara have a clear awareness of class identities even if they do not possess an organized form of consciousness. Upward mobility is displayed by living in a cemented house, building a wall around the house, owning a television, and having a steady income, especially from a white collar job. In contrast to the security possessed by the upper class, *bhadralok*, most inhabitants of Kalipara are casual laborers who have to face periods of unemployment. *Bhadralok* emerged as the educated and urban ruling elite of Bengal during British rule when most castes in India became socially and economically differentiated. The composition of *bhadralok* is not totally distinct from caste considerations as the main groups constituting the *bhadralok* are the three higher castes, although anybody having a white collar job is regarded as *bhadralok*. Class identities are not novelties in India, and neither is considering status criteria other than caste in marriages a new phenomenon. But unlike arranged intercaste marriages, people generally consider other status criteria only after having made sure that the match follows caste endogamy.

Dowry demands are usually classified according to occupation. Nowadays, ricksha drivers who earn Rs. 1200-1800 a month are said to demand Rs. 10,000. One ricksha driver was prepared to spend Rs. 20,000 for his daughter's marriage. A woman belonging to a Namashudra caste, a high school graduate who had married a man belonging to a higher caste and selling clothes, had partly saved the money for her wedding herself. Her marriage expenses, Rs. 20,000, did not include cash as it was not demanded. The husband was given a watch. She brought the usual things to her in-laws' house: an *ālmāri* (a wardrobe), bed, dressing table, and golden ornaments, which cost a total of Rs. 12,000. She and her widowed mother also provided the Rs. 10,000 marriage dinner. A man selling snacks gave his

daughter in marriage to a goldsmith. According to the father of the bride, the groom's side did not demand a dowry; the bride's parents only gave what they felt like giving. The total expenses of the daughter's marriage were Rs. 60,000. The parents who arranged this marriage earn about Rs. 4000 a month from their snack business. About a third of the Rs. 60,000 was spent on the daughter's golden ornaments, about a third on bed, wardrobe, and utensils the daughter brought with her to the in-laws' house, and Rs. 15,000 on the marriage dinner.

The marriage expenses of an ideal arranged marriage in Kalipara consist of three types of gifts: the son-in-law is given a few gifts like a watch and a ring; the daughter is given golden ornaments, saris, furniture (a wardrobe, a bed, and a dressing table) and brass utensils to take with her to the in-laws' house, and – depending on the demands of the groom's party and the bargaining between the bride's and groom's party – the bride's family gives cash to the groom's family as dowry. These items represent a class-based, contemporary ideal. As Mukherjee's (1971) study of six villages in Bengal reveals, at least in the 1940s, bride-price was more common than a dowry among the lower castes. A few men in the villages had remained bachelors because they could not afford to pay the minimum sum for the bride-price (Mukherjee 1971: 7).

In Kalipara women from the poorest families had not received any marriage gifts from their own parents; instead, the in-laws of a few women had provided the marriage saris, jewellery, and food for the marriage dinner. These cases show a continuity with certain features of bride-price marriage. When the bride-price was prevalent in rural Bengal, the grooms' family provided the marriage gifts and dinner in addition to the bride-price (Mukherjee 1971: 249). The most modest marriage gifts from parents of the bride in Kalipara consist of a sari or sari and one piece of golden ornaments. Many women, who now had adult children, had been married off hastily to poor men, and their parents had been able to give only modest gifts at the time of marriage. These women now concentrated their efforts on arranging their daughters' marriages with great care and proper gifts. It is also common knowledge that the dowry demands are much higher now than at the time of parents' own marriages.

The rising dowry demands and payments among the lower castes are generally interpreted as a sign of low castes imitating high castes. Yet, the same people who are ready to pay high dowries also show disregard for their caste identity and purity by practicing intercaste marriages. At the same time, the prevalence of arranged marriages shows that marriages are not considered as unions between two individuals but a question of testing the status of bride givers and takers.

AGENCY IN HIERARCHY

In Kalipara, hierarchy constructed through marriage alliances is not based on the assessment of purity of the caste and line alone; hierarchical considerations extend to class status. Urban hierarchy is constructed on the basis of multiple understandings and criteria for hierarchy. In the city, immigrants' attempts to construct new identities are not as bound to the status and reputation of their immediate kin as they would be in their native village. Indeed, as the caste statuses of family titles vary according to the locality, the urban neighborhood forces people to reevaluate their understanding of caste. Paying high dowries is a way not only to maintain one's status but to establish a new status and to compensate for the inherited low status. At the same time, a loosening of caste endogamy is leading toward class endogamy. I found only high caste women from poor families who had married to scheduled caste casual laborers. While people de-emphasize caste differences, class differences appear to be caste like. People who identify themselves as belonging to the upper class maintain a distance from the lower classes – the same way upper castes have traditionally maintained a distance from the lower castes. There is a constant negotiation in the neighborhood about who is regarded as high and low, and in this dynamic situation people were suspicious of my question concerning whom they knew in the neighborhood. People were cautious about revealing their networks because it is one's contacts which define identity and status.

Caste and class identities influence each other; nevertheless, caste cannot be reduced to class. People do not confuse caste with class status. Class and caste status are separate but interconnected. Women who marry outside their caste do not end up in a casteless state; they are considered as belonging to the husband's caste although women also maintain a strong sense of identification with their parents' family title and caste. In addition, those whose occupation and caste do not match illustrate the separateness of caste and class. For instance, a Brahmin bus conductor, ashamed of his occupation, talks about wiping away one's pride, but also continues to perform religious rituals and maintains his high caste identity through his life style.

The prevalence of arranged intercaste marriages in Kalipara gives a clue as to how reformulations of structures can take place. Although Kalipara residents are not especially motivated to promote and protect the purity of their caste groups, they have not abandoned the idea of hierarchy; instead, they build new modes of hierarchy through marriage arrangements. The intertwining of class and caste also shows how class identities are culturally constructed, in this case through kinship constructs. Classes can be studied as objective structures based on the relationships of production, but an understanding of the dynamics of social structures and human agency requires an examination of the interconnection of separate modes of culturally constructed hierarchy.

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