

## **Class and Caste Stratification in the Societal Framework of Kerala: An Analysis of Select Matrimonial Advertisements**

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### **Abstract**

Class and caste are interwoven realities of our society. Caste is synonymous to power and privilege. People belonging to the so-called upper castes enjoy every kind of privileges in the society, owing to its hegemonic influence. The class and caste hierarchy can be observed in every domain of culture in a particular society. An analysis of cultural artefacts will reveal similar manifestations in every culture. Advertisement is one among the most influential cultural artefacts of our times. It is a popular visual artefact that goes a long way in reinforcing patriarchy and the supremacy of the upper classes. Matrimony is depicted as a matter of honour and pride in many advertisements. Matrimonial advertisements normalise the class and caste hierarchies in the institution of marriage in Kerala by creating and reinforcing a false consciousness in the audience. The paper aims to explore how advertisements commodify and market the institution of marriage. It scrutinizes these visual narratives to find the extent to which they perpetuate the preconceived notions regarding class and caste hierarchies, in the context of the institution of marriage.

**Keywords:** Class, Caste, Power, Culture, Marriage, Commodification

Caste system is a unique characteristic feature which is internalised in the social fabric of India. It categorises people on the basis of an ancient belief system. Individuals were classified into various castes in accordance with the Varna system delineated in *Manusmriti*. The four Varnas, namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, exist in a defined hierarchical structure. Those individuals who do not conform to the Varna system are designated as Avarnas, commonly referred to as the untouchables. This belief system continues to be observed throughout India in diverse manifestations across various

communities. Caste remains an undeniable reality within Indian society. Even today it remains as an essentiality due to various socio-political factors. It constitutes another manifestation of inequality, if not outright untouchability.

The caste system is perpetuated across generations predominantly through marital unions, particularly arranged marriages. These marriages adhere to the so-called traditions, rituals and practices. The stringent observance of these norms and conventions prescribes the 'appropriate' manner of conducting marriages for subsequent generations. The frequent exposure to these marriages makes children conditioned to the blindly follow and uncritically accept the norms and rituals that govern them.

These societal norms are fundamentally based on segregation. They foster the notion of 'the other' among individuals belonging to specific communities, thereby reinforcing the process of othering. Such norms delineate individuals based on caste and inculcate notions of casteism within them. Consequently, a seemingly joyous wedding function adhering to traditions and norms become a space of segregation, inequality and power hierarchies through the perpetuation of casteist notions.

Marital practices within Kerala society are predominantly regulated by religious laws. Individuals from particular religious communities engage in unions in accordance with the laws pertinent to their respective communities. Each religious group is further subdivided into various communities based on specific social hierarchies. For example, within Hinduism, there exists a plethora of communities categorized by caste, such as Brahmin, Nair, Ezhava, and Pulaya, among others. Brahmins are considered superior to all the other castes within the Hindu religion. Given that members of other religious groups are often regarded as individuals who have converted from Hinduism, a similar hierarchical structure tends to be

observed within those groups as well. These religious groups also have other class markers which create power hierarchies.

In the historical context of matrimonial practices in Kerala, there exists a significant absence of scholarly information about marriages of communities belonging to the lower strata of the society. Conversely, literature and discourses concerning the matrimonial traditions of the upper caste are readily accessible, whereas resources pertaining to the matrimonial practices of lower castes remain exceedingly limited. This disparity distinctly highlights the prevailing caste hegemony entrenched within the social fabric of Kerala.

In the contemporary Kerala society, to facilitate arranged marriages, there are numerous platforms available. Ranging from marriage brokers to matrimonial agencies and digital platforms, there is an abundance of avenues through which individuals may seek suitable partners. Currently, matrimonial websites represent the most prominent medium for identifying appropriate matches, primarily due to their extensive array of choices and other features. Notable matrimonial websites operational in Kerala encompass *M4marry*, *Kerala Matrimony*, *Community Matrimony*, *Chavara Matrimony*, and *Nikkah in Kerala*, among others.

All these matrimonial websites work on the basic idea that people belonging to different religion or castes should not marry each other. Given that endogamy is predominantly practiced within Kerala society, this notion may resonate with the general populace. Even though the rules are not against exogamy it is not so popular among people due to the influence of religious institutions. Furthermore, these matrimonial websites perpetuate regressive ideologies regarding class and caste hierarchies through their advertisements as well. Such advertisements contribute to the formation of caste distinctions,

notions of caste supremacy, and hierarchical perceptions within the cognitive frameworks of children, thereby posing a significant threat to the preservation of social harmony.

A critical examination of the advertisements disseminated by these matrimonial websites unveils the complex social structures and power dynamics inherent within the respective society. The promotional materials of matrimonial websites operating in Kerala clearly articulate the power hierarchies predicated upon class and caste distinctions. These advertisements portray individuals from higher castes as exhibiting greater generosity and openness. In addition to that, the representation of people belonging to the lower strata of the society is meagre.

A particular series of advertisements from the matrimonial website *Community Matrimony* illustrates various families representing three distinct communities in Kerala: the Nair and Ezhava communities from the Hindu religion, alongside a Christian family. The caste affiliations are explicitly stated within the advertisements themselves. The Nair woman in search of an ideal partner is depicted as a pilot, whereas the Ezhava woman who is married is portrayed as a homemaker. This representation can be construed as reflective of the underlying social hierarchy. The positioning of these two castes within the hierarchy is both reminded and reinforced through this advertisement, suggesting an implicit superiority of one caste over the other.

The selection of these two caste groups from a multitude of other castes merits rigorous analysis. The rationale for their selection over other caste groups, which occupy a superior position within the hierarchical structure, is predominantly attributable to the purchasing power exhibited by individuals belonging to these two caste categories. Furthermore, these particular caste groups also outnumber other castes. So, the advertisers consciously avoid other caste groups as they are less in number. Also, the representation of

lower caste people in the advertisement intended at middle-class and upper middle-class people would have seemed problematic to them.

The third community depicted in the advertisement is characterized as a more generalized category – Kerala Christian. Indeed, within the Kerala Christian demographic, there exists a multitude of subdivisions, including Catholic, Orthodox, Marthoma, Knanaya, and Jacobite, among others. The Kerala Christian female portrayed in the advertisement is a proficient baker, renowned for her exceptional cake-baking abilities. The portrayal does not extend beyond a stereotypical representation of an upper middle-class Christian woman aspiring to achieve prominence through her culinary talents, with the unwavering support of her husband.

The examination of this corpus of advertisements reveals that they reflect and seek to reinforce the prevailing social hierarchy that permeates the socio-cultural landscape of Kerala. The distinctions between class and caste are portrayed as inherent and natural phenomena. Furthermore, consumerist ideologies are perpetuated in the advertisements, emphasising the importance of material possessions. They contribute to a distorted representation of reality by reinforcing prevailing dominant ideologies. Moreover, the presence of patriarchal undertones is conspicuous, as these advertisements predominantly depict women in the role of homemakers.

The hierarchical structures of class and caste in Kerala are further emphasised, and these ideologies are perpetuated through matrimonial advertisements by the extensive use of caste-based preferences and class markers. Additionally, they commodify the institution of marriage, marketing a cultural practice as a mere consumer product. Furthermore, these advertisements are predominantly characterized by misogynistic tendencies.

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