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Reconfiguring Marriage in India: Caste, Educational Mobility, Economic Precarity, Dowry, and Marital Instability

إعادة تشكيل الزواج في الهند: الطبقة، والحراك التعليمي، والهشاشة الاقتصادية، والمهر، وعدم الاستقرار الزوجي

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Abstract:

Using unit-level data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21), the Census of India 2011, and the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2022, this article dissects the intersecting influences of caste, education, family wealth, dowry, and widowhood on marriage formation, dissolution, singlehood, non-normative partnerships (live-in and extramarital relationships), marital violence, and the contested phenomenon of interfaith unions popularly labelled “love jihad”. Nationwide, divorce/separation rates remain low (1.2%) but are sharply stratified by caste: Scheduled Caste (SC) women show 2.4% separation versus 0.7% among upper-caste Hindus. Never-married rates among the 30–39 age cohort have risen to 12.3% for urban graduate women, driven by hypergamy deficits and economic independence. Among Muslims, 18.4% of graduate women are married to men with less than secondary education—nearly double the Hindu rate—owing to a truncated pool of educated grooms, patriarchal controls on female mobility, and dowry-linked exchange. The Delhi case study reveals an educational hypogamy rate of 21.7% among Muslim graduate women and a co-existing pattern of aggressive community and legal opposition to interfaith unions, with 63 formal police complaints and court petitions relating to interfaith couples registered between 2019 and 2022. We further document the persistent and lethal reach of dowry: 6516 dowry deaths and 144593 cases of cruelty by husband or relatives were recorded in 2022, with a conviction rate of only 11–17 per cent in dowry death trials. Marital rape remains legally unrecognized, yet NFHS-5 data indicate that 6% of married women have experienced spousal sexual violence. The article also examines the 43 million widows of India, for whom remarriage remains socially prohibited among the upper castes, economically precarious across all communities, and ritually stigmatized in ways that produce a form of “social death”. Multivariate logistic regressions confirm that both hyper-education of women and acute economic precarity destabilize marriages, with the highest dissolution risk found among dual-earner, high-education couples where the wife’s income exceeds the husband’s. The article argues that India’s marriage market is undergoing a fundamental realignment driven by gendered educational expansion, persistent caste endogamy, the extractive logic of dowry, the prohibition of widow remarriage, and a conservative backlash against female autonomy.

JEL Classification 2020: J12, J13, J16, D10, D13, I31, K36, Z13.

Keyword: Marriage, divorce, dowry, domestic violence, widowhood, live-in relationships, singlehood, love-jihad, caste, education, Delhi, Muslim hypergamy.

المخلص:

بالاعتماد على البيانات على مستوى الوحدات الإحصائية المستمدة من المسح الوطني لصحة الأسرة في الهند (NFHS-5)، 2019–2021، وتعداد الهند لعام 2011، والمكتب الوطني لسجلات الجرائم (NCRB) لعام 2022، تحلل هذه المقالة التأثيرات المتداخلة لكلٍ من الطبقة الاجتماعية، والتعليم، وثروة الأسرة، والمهر، والترمل في تكوين الزواج وانحلاله، والعزوف عن الزواج، والعلاقات غير التقليدية (المساكنة والعلاقات خارج إطار الزواج)، والعنف الزوجي، والظاهرة الخلفية المتمثلة في الزيجات بين أتباع الديانات المختلفة، والتي يُشار إليها شائعاً بمصطلح «جهاد الحب».

وعلى مستوى الهند، لا تزال معدلات الطلاق والانفصال منخفضة، إذ تبلغ 1.2%، لكنها تتفاوت بوضوح وفقاً للطبقة الاجتماعية؛ حيث تبلغ نسبة الانفصال بين نساء الطبقات المُجدولة (SC) نحو 2.4%، مقارنةً بـ 0.7% بين الهندوس المنتمين إلى الطبقات العليا. كما ارتفعت نسبة النساء اللاتي لم يسبق لهن الزواج ضمن الفئة العمرية من 30 إلى 39 عاماً إلى 12.3% بين النساء الحضريرات الحاصلات على شهادة جامعية، ويُعزى ذلك إلى اختلال فرص الزواج التصاعدي من حيث المكانة الاجتماعية والاقتصادية، فضلاً عن الاستقلال الاقتصادي للمرأة.

وبين المسلمات، ترتبط 18.4% من النساء الحاصلات على شهادات جامعية برجال لم يتجاوز تعليمهم المرحلة الثانوية، وهي نسبة تقارب ضعف نظيرتها بين الهندوس. ويُعزى ذلك إلى محدودية عدد الرجال المتعلمين المتاحين للزواج، والقيود الأبوية المفروضة

على تنقل المرأة، وأنماط التبادل المرتبطة بالمهر. وتكشف دراسة الحالة في دلهي عن بلوغ نسبة الزواج الذي تكون فيه المرأة أعلى تعليمًا من الرجل 21.7% بين المسلمات الحاصلات على شهادات جامعية. ويتزامن ذلك مع وجود أنماط من المعارضة المجتمعية والقانونية الشديدة للزيجات بين أتباع الديانات المختلفة؛ إذ سُجِّلَت 63 شكوى رسمية لدى الشرطة والتماسات قضائية تتعلق بالأزواج من ديانات مختلفة خلال الفترة الممتدة من عام 2019 إلى عام 2022.

وتوثق الدراسة كذلك استمرار الآثار الخطيرة للمهر، التي قد تصل إلى حدّ إزهاق الأرواح؛ فقد سُجِّلَت 6516 حالة وفاة مرتبطة بالمهر، و144593 حالة من القسوة والعنف على يد الزوج أو أقاربه خلال عام 2022، في حين لم تتجاوز نسبة الإدانة في محاكمات جرائم الوفاة المرتبطة بالمهر 17%–11% ولا يزال الاغتصاب الزوجي غير معترف به قانونيًا، رغم أن بيانات المسح الوطني لصحة الأسرة (NFHS-5) تشير إلى أن 6% من النساء المتزوجات تعرّضن للعنف الجنسي من قبل أزواجهن.

وتتناول المقالة أيضًا أوضاع الأرامل في الهند، والبالغ عددهن 43 مليون أرملة، حيث لا يزال الزواج مرة أخرى محظورًا اجتماعيًا على الأرامل المنتميات إلى الطبقات العليا، ومحفوظًا بالمخاطر الاقتصادية لدى مختلف الجماعات، فضلًا عن الوصم الطقوسي والاجتماعي الذي يفرض على شكل من أشكال الموت الاجتماعي.

وتؤكد نتائج نماذج الانحدار اللوجستي متعددة المتغيرات أن ارتفاع المستوى التعليمي للمرأة مقارنةً بالرجل، إلى جانب الهشاشة الاقتصادية الحادة، يسهمان في زعزعة استقرار الحياة الزوجية. وتظهر أعلى مخاطر انحلال الزواج بين الأزواج الذين يعمل كلا الطرفين منهم ويتمتعون بمستوى تعليمي مرتفع، ولا سيما عندما يتجاوز دخل الزوجة دخل الزوج.

وتجادل المقالة بأن سوق الزواج في الهند يشهد إعادة اصطفاف جوهرية، تدفعها عوامل تشمل التوسع في تعليم المرأة وما يرتبط به من تحولات جنسية، واستمرار زواج أفراد الجماعة الواحدة من داخلها وفقًا للطبقة الاجتماعية، والمنطق الاستغلالي المرتبط بالمهر، وحظر إعادة زواج الأرامل، فضلًا عن ردّ الفعل المحافظ المناهض لاستقلال المرأة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الزواج، الطلاق، المهر، العنف الأسري، الترمل، علاقات المساكنة، العزوف عن الزواج، جهاد الحب، الطبقة الاجتماعية، التعليم، دلهي، الزواج التصاعدي بين المسلمين.

1. Introduction

Indian nuptiality has long been perceived through the lens of tradition, universal marriage, and minimal dissolution. Marriage in India is not merely a union of two individuals but a sacrament—a *sanskara* among Hindus and a solemn contract (*nikah*) among Muslims—that reaffirms caste, kinship, and community boundaries. For centuries, these structures have proven remarkably resilient. However, the past two decades have witnessed a profound disjuncture. The expansion of female higher education (the gross enrolment ratio for women in tertiary education rose from 10.5% in 2005–06 to 28.4% in 2020–21), the slow but steady increase in women's Labour-force participation (currently 32.5% according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2021–22), and the proliferation of digital matchmaking platforms such as Shaadi.com, Tinder, and Bumble have fundamentally altered the terrain of partner selection. Alongside rising singlehood, new forms of intimacy—live-in relationships, serial monogamy, and extramarital affairs—are challenging the normative framework of the Hindu joint family and Islamic marital contracts. Simultaneously, the politicization of interfaith marriage under the “love jihad” rubric in states such as Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Karnataka has rendered cross-community romance a high-risk activity, especially for Muslim men and Hindu women.

Yet these transformations are occurring against a backdrop of entrenched violence, economic extraction, and the persistent social exclusion of widows. The dowry system, despite being criminalized under the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, continues to structure marriage as a transaction in which the bride's family pays for her admission into the groom's household. The consequences

are lethal: 6516 dowry deaths were recorded in 2022, alongside 144593 cases of cruelty by husband or relatives under Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code [13,15]. The conviction rate in dowry death trials hovers between 11 and 17 per cent, and more than 94 per cent of cases remain pending in court [16,17]. Marital rape remains legally unrecognized except when the wife is under fifteen, yet NFHS-5 data indicate that 6% of married women aged 18–49 have experienced spousal sexual violence—a figure that translates into more than ten million women [23,24]. Meanwhile, India has the largest widow population in the world—approximately 43 million widowed women against 12 million widowed men—yet widow remarriage remains socially prohibited among the upper castes and economically precarious across all communities [27,29]. The gap between legal protection and lived reality constitutes one of the most glaring failures of the Indian social and criminal justice system.

This article provides a comprehensive empirical mapping of these phenomena using the latest available large-scale datasets and situates the local specificities of Delhi—a cosmopolitan metropolis with a dense concentration of higher-education institutions and sharply segmented kinship worlds—within the national picture. While national surveys offer breadth, the Delhi case study provides depth, illuminating how local Labour markets, prestigious universities, high-cost housing, entrenched communal politics, and the extractive logic of dowry co-produce distinct marriage regimes. We integrate quantitative analysis of unit-level National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) data with qualitative interviews, police records, matrimonial registration micro-data, crime statistics, and census reports on widowhood to answer seven research questions:

1. How do marriage timing, divorce/separation, singlehood, and non-marital partnerships vary by caste, religion, education, and household wealth?
2. What explains the high prevalence of educated Muslim women marrying uneducated men, and how does this pattern interact with community-level gender norms?
3. What are the primary structural and cultural drivers of the widespread “marriage problem” reported by educated youth—both male and female—across different wealth quintiles?
4. Why do marriages among highly educated partners, particularly dual-earner couples, exhibit greater instability than those among the less educated?
5. How do love affairs transition (or fail to transition) into marriage under varying degrees of parental and community interference, and in what ways do parents function as negative gatekeepers on the basis of status, caste, and financial considerations?
6. What is the relationship between dowry, marital violence, rape, and the criminalization of female autonomy, and how do these phenomena reinforce the structural subordination of women within marriage?
7. Why does widow remarriage remain socially prohibited across castes and communities, and what are the economic, social, and psychological consequences of this prohibition for India’s 43 million widows?

We argue that India’s marriage market is undergoing a fundamental realignment driven by five intersecting forces: the gendered expansion of education, the persistence of caste endogamy as a non-negotiable filter, the extractive logic of dowry as a mechanism of patriarchal control, the prohibition of widow remarriage as a continuation of caste purity logic beyond the death of the husband, and a conservative backlash against female autonomy that manifests in both legal

instruments (anti-conversion laws) and extra-legal violence (Honor killings, social boycotts). The result is not a straightforward liberalization of conjugal norms but a complex, often contradictory, reconfiguration in which educated women simultaneously gain the resources to delay or exit marriage and face intensified patriarchal surveillance, economic extraction, and the persistent threat of violence.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Classical sociological accounts of Indian marriage emphasize caste endogamy, arranged marriages, and patrilocal residence as enduring pillars of social reproduction [1]. Dumont's structuralist model and the later ethnographic work of Kolenda and Dube situated marriage within the broader project of caste purity, wherein women's sexuality was the conduit for maintaining group boundaries. This foundational literature, while indispensable, has been productively challenged by recent demographic scholarship that foregrounds the agency of individuals and the impact of macro-structural shifts.

The concept of the "female marriage squeeze"—a deficit of suitably educated grooms—has become central to understanding delayed marriage and non-marriage among educated Indian women [2]. Esteve and Kashyap (2020) demonstrate that the hypergamy norm, i.e., the expectation that a husband's education and income should exceed the wife's, has become increasingly difficult to satisfy as women's tertiary attainment outpaces men's, leading to a growing acceptability of *educational hypogamy* [3]. In the Indian context, however, hypogamy is not merely a demographic outcome; it is heavily mediated by caste. Upper-caste families may tolerate a less-educated groom if his caste is impeccable, whereas a Dalit groom, however educated, remains unacceptable. The intersection of caste and gender thus produces a graded matrimonial field where the hypergamy norm is relaxed for some but absolutely enforced for others.

Among Muslims, the dynamics acquire additional layers. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) and subsequent studies have documented the relative educational and economic marginalization of the community. Muslim male literacy stands at 73.2% against 78.8% for Hindu males (Census 2011), and the gross enrolment ratio in higher education is less than half the national average. This supply-side constraint interacts with strong norms of female seclusion (*purdah*) and *biradari* endogamy, which restrict women's mobility and choice of partner. The resulting marriage squeeze is not simply about numbers but about a culturally enforced narrowing of the eligibility pool. Where a Hindu graduate woman might delay marriage in search of an equally educated man, a Muslim graduate woman in north India is often compelled by family pressure to marry the best available man within the *biradari*, even if he has little formal schooling.

The "love jihad" discourse, legally codified in the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, 2021 and similar laws in other states, represents a new dimension of state-sanctioned interference in conjugal choice. While empirical research shows that inter-religious marriages constitute less than 0.3% of all unions and are overwhelmingly consensual [4], the discourse has empowered vigilante groups, intensified family violence, and added a layer of legal risk. Importantly, it has also reshaped the parental calculus: families now deploy the "love jihad" frame to police their daughters' cross-community friendships, effectively criminalizing romantic autonomy.

The marital instability of educated couples has been theorized through multiple lenses. The economic independence hypothesis posits that women with higher earnings face lower barriers to

exit an unsatisfactory marriage. Yet Allendorf and Pandian (2020) show that in the Indian setting, it is not absolute income but *relative* income that matters: when a wife's education or earnings surpass the husband's, it destabilizes the gender hierarchy on which the patriarchal household is built, leading to increased conflict and dissolution risk [5]. Inter-caste love marriages, while symbolizing a break from tradition, often suffer from the withdrawal of kin support, which Chowdhry (2021) identifies as a primary predictor of marital distress [6].

A separate but deeply connected literature addresses dowry and marital violence. The dowry system has been theorized as a mechanism of economic extraction that reinforces women's subordinate status and exposes them to violence when demands are unmet [12]. Studies consistently find that dowry harassment is strongly associated with domestic violence, mental illness, and suicidal ideation among married women [19,20]. The mental health consequences of dowry harassment include clinical depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, while the legal system's failure to deliver accountability—with conviction rates of 11–17 per cent in dowry death cases and 94 per cent pendency—has been described as a system “rigged against the dead” [18,16]. The Supreme Court of India has repeatedly intervened, most recently declaring dowry abolition an “urgent social and constitutional imperative” [26]. Marital rape, by contrast, remains legally unrecognized in India, and a systematic review found that sexual coercion by an intimate partner ranges from 9 to 80 per cent across studies [23].

The literature on widowhood in India has documented the intersection of caste, gender, and property relations in producing the “social death” of widows. The 1921 Census observed that castes could be arranged on a scale “from those that absolutely forbid the remarriage of women, through those that permit but discountenance, to those who accept it as the rule” [30]. The prohibition of widow remarriage was most stringent among the upper castes—Brahmins, Rajputs, Kayasths, and Banias—and was progressively adopted by lower castes through the process of “Sanskritization” [30]. The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856, removed legal obstacles but simultaneously deprived the remarrying widow of her inheritance rights, deeming her “civilly dead” for the purposes of succession [36]. Contemporary research has documented the economic vulnerability, social exclusion, and psychological trauma of widows, particularly in pilgrimage towns such as Vrindavan, where up to 20,000 widows live in ashrams and shelters [44,41]. The National Human Rights Commission's 2024 advisory noted that “repressive practices by families who don't allow widows to participate in auspicious occasions, or wear ornaments or colourful clothes after their husband's death” remain widespread, and that there is “no penalty for these acts because they harm a woman's dignity but don't cause physical injury” [41]. Our analysis builds on these insights by disentangling the specific pathways through which education, caste, dowry, widowhood, and family interference interact to produce marital fragility, violence, and social exclusion.

3. Data and Methods

We draw primarily on the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019–21, a nationally representative survey covering 636699 households and 724115 women aged 15–49. The women's questionnaire includes detailed modules on marital history, age at first marriage, type of union (whether arranged by family or self-selected), current marital status (married, widowed, divorced, separated), reasons for separation, and domestic violence. From the household and women's files we extract caste (Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Other Backward Class, and General), religion (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, and others), years of completed education for both the respondent and her current/last husband, household wealth quintile (based on a composite asset index), place of

residence (urban/rural), and state. The Census of India 2011 provides district-level literacy rates, marital status distributions by age and sex, the proportion of inter-caste marriages, and the widow population by caste and community, which serve as contextual controls. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2022 provides district-level statistics on dowry deaths, cruelty by husband or relatives (Section 498A IPC), rape, and other crimes against women, which we use to map the geography of marital violence. The 1921 and 1961 Censuses provide historical data on widow remarriage prohibition by caste, which we use to establish the persistence of the pattern.

For the Delhi case study, we supplement the quantitative analysis with three additional data sources. First, we obtained through Right to Information (RTI) requests and legal-aid records a dataset of 63 police complaints and court petitions relating to interfaith and inter-caste couples in NCT Delhi between 2019 and 2022, containing details of the complainant, accused, religious affiliation of both parties, and case outcome. Second, we hand-coded 180 marriage registration forms from Delhi government marriage registration offices for the years 2022–23, extracting information on the education, occupation, caste, and religion of the bride and groom. Third, during 2023 we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 married couples residing in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR): 15 couples in which the wife is a graduate and the husband has less than secondary education (the hypogamous pairs), and 15 dual-educated couples where both spouses hold at least a bachelor's degree. Interviews were conducted in Hindi, Urdu, and English, lasted 60–90 minutes, and were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis.

Our analytical strategy proceeds in six stages. First, we compute weighted descriptive statistics—medians, percentages, and cross-tabulations—to map national patterns in marriage timing, dissolution, singlehood, and non-marital unions by caste, religion, education, and wealth quintile. Second, we estimate a multinomial logistic regression with divorce/separation as the outcome, using a set of predictors that includes wife's education, husband's education, a dummy for whether wife's income exceeds husband's, inter-caste marriage (self-reported or deduced from caste mismatch), household wealth, age, and urban residence. Third, we run a binary logistic regression on the probability of being never married at ages 30–39 for women and men separately. Fourth, we present the Delhi case study as a mixed-methods analysis that triangulates the quantitative patterns from the NFHS-5 district factsheets and the marriage registration data with the qualitative narratives from the interviews and the police complaint records. Fifth, we integrate NCRB 2022 crime statistics with NFHS-5 domestic violence data to analyze the relationship between dowry, marital violence, and the structural subordination of women. Sixth, we analyze census and NHRC data on widowhood to document the persistence of the prohibition on widow remarriage across castes and communities.

4. National Findings: Marriage, Divorce, Singlehood, and LBSE

4.1. Marriage Timing and Caste

Table 1 presents the median age at first marriage for women aged 25–49 by caste and tribe. The familiar gradient is evident: Scheduled Caste (SC) women marry earliest (median 18.2 years), followed closely by Scheduled Tribes (18.5 years) and Other Backward Classes (18.8 years), while forward caste (General) women marry substantially later (20.3 years). The wealth gradient is even steeper: women in the poorest quintile marry at a median age of 17.9 years, compared to 22.0 years for those in the richest quintile—a gap of 4.1 years. The proportion of women married before the legal age of 18 has declined from 47.4% in NFHS-3 (2005–06) to 23.3% in NFHS-5, yet this national

figure conceals considerable regional variation. In Bihar, West Bengal, and Rajasthan, over 30% of women still marry before 18, while in Kerala and Himachal Pradesh the figure is below 10%. Notably, even among the richest quintile, 8.6% of women were married before 18, indicating that wealth alone does not eliminate early marriage; caste and regional norms exert an independent influence.

Table 1: Median age at first marriage and divorce/separation rate, by caste (NFHS-5, women 25–49)

Caste/Tribe	Median age (years)	Divorce/sep. (%)
Scheduled Caste (SC)	18.2	2.4
Scheduled Tribe (ST)	18.5	1.8
Other Backward Class (OBC)	18.8	1.3
Forward Caste (General)	20.3	0.7

4.2. Divorce, Separation, and Desertion

Nationally, only 1.2% of ever-married women aged 25–49 report being divorced or separated, a figure that understates the true prevalence of marital disruption because it excludes desertion—cases where the husband abandons the wife without legal divorce—and because of the stigma attached to reporting separation. The dissolution rate exhibits sharp stratification. It reaches 4.6% among urban women with 15 or more years of education and 5.2% among women married before age 15. Inter-caste marriages—which are overwhelmingly self-arranged “love marriages”—have a dissolution rate 2.3 times higher than within-caste unions (odds ratio from logistic regression), consistent with the hypothesis that kin withdrawal undermines marital stability. Among the dissolution cases in NFHS-5, desertion accounts for roughly 55%, formal divorce for 32%, and separation by mutual consent for the remainder. Desertion is most prevalent in the rural belts of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh, where male out-migration for work is common and the legal infrastructure for divorce is inaccessible to most women. A typical pattern involves the husband migrating to a city, establishing a second household, and ceasing all contact and remittances, leaving the wife in a state of “social widowhood” without the legal protections of divorce.

4.3. Singlehood

The proportion of never-married women aged 30–39—an age by which marriage is near-universal in the Indian cultural script—has risen from 4.1% in 2005–06 to 8.7% in 2019–21. This increase is almost entirely concentrated among the educated urban segment: for women with a bachelor’s degree or higher living in urban areas, the never-married share is 15.2%, with rates approaching 20% in southern states and 12% in the Hindi belt. Among men of the same age, the never-married share is 12.4%, but the underlying drivers are different. For women, non-marriage is associated with higher education and economic independence; for men, it is associated with low socioeconomic status—landlessness, casual Laboure, and low education—indicating a structural deficit of brides

for men at the bottom of the economic ladder. Our multivariate binary logistic regression confirms that for women, each additional year of schooling increases the odds of being never married at 30–39 by 18% ($p < 0.001$), while for men, higher education *decreases* the odds. Wealth operates in opposite directions: among women, the richest quintile has the highest never-married rate; among men, the poorest quintile has the highest.

4.4. LBSE: Live-in, Break-ups, Separation, and Extramarital Affairs

NFHS-5 does not directly measure live-in relationships, but 1.6% of women aged 15–49 reported being in a “consensual union” without formal marriage—a category that includes cohabiting partnerships. These are heavily concentrated in metropolitan cities: Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, and Pune together account for over 60% of such unions. The real incidence is likely higher, as many women may be unwilling to disclose a status that attracts moral censure. Ethnographic research from college campuses in Delhi, Pune, and Chennai documents a sharp rise in pre-marital romantic relationships and serial monogamy, accompanied by a surge in break-up-related mental health crises. Campus counsellors report that break-up distress has become one of the top three reasons for seeking psychological support among female students. Extramarital affairs, though heavily stigmatized, are acknowledged by 2.8% of ever-married men in the NFHS-5 men’s module (which asks about sexual partners outside marriage), while the corresponding figure for women is 0.5%. The gender gap may reflect under-reporting by women, given the greater social risk attached to female infidelity. Importantly, caste-based segregation in sexual and romantic networks reinforces endogamy even in covert relationships: a Dalit man having an affair with an upper-caste married woman faces not just social opprobrium but the threat of lethal violence, a pattern vividly illustrated by numerous honor killing cases.

5. The Educated Woman–Uneducated Man Conundrum: The Muslim Case

The phenomenon of highly educated women marrying considerably less educated men—termed *educational hypogamy*—is not exclusive to Muslims, but its prevalence within the community is striking and demands a situated explanation. Table 2 shows that among currently married Muslim women aged 25–49 with a bachelor’s degree or higher, 18.4% have a husband with less than secondary schooling, compared to 9.6% among similarly educated Hindu women, 8.2% among Christians, and 6.0% among Sikhs. The gap is even wider when the sample is restricted to Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal, where the Muslim hypogamy rate exceeds 25%.

Table 2: Educational hypogamy among graduate women (age 25–49), by religion, NFHS-5

Religion	Wife Bachelor’s $\geq$	Husband < Secondary	% Hypogamous
Hindu	72,453	6,955	9.6
Muslim	11,208	2,062	18.4
Christian	2,311	189	8.2
Sikh	1,687	101	6.0

Three interlocking mechanisms sustain this pattern. First, the educational pipeline among Muslims remains narrow, especially for men. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (2019–20), the gross enrolment ratio for Muslim men was a mere 5.2%, against a national average of 26.3% and far below the ratios for Hindu, Christian, and Sikh men. This creates an absolute shortage of degree-holding grooms. Second, conservative kinship norms—particularly the ideology of *purdah* and the premium placed on *biradari* endogamy—severely restrict Muslim women’s freedom to independently seek partners outside the community or the immediate kin network. Many families would rather accept a less-educated man from the same *biradari* than risk the social censure of having an unmarried daughter past the “marriageable” age, which is culturally pegged between 22 and 25 even for graduates. Third, the dowry system, though illegal under both Indian civil law and Islamic personal law, operates as a compensatory mechanism. A girl’s family may “compensate” for her higher education—which in the marriage market is paradoxically perceived as a liability because it raises expectations of a more educated groom—by offering a larger dowry, thereby making her acceptable to a family of lower educational status but equivalent *biradari* standing.

Interviews with families in Delhi vividly illustrate this calculus. As one father of a postgraduate daughter explained: “We searched for an educated boy for two years. The few who were in our *biradari* either demanded a dowry we could not afford or wanted a lighter-skinned girl. Finally we settled for a matric-pass boy from a nearby town. He is from our own people; that is what matters. My daughter teaches in a school and he drives a taxi. But at least she is married, and no one can point a finger at us.” The word “settled” (*compromise kar liya*) recurs in these narratives, encoding both the pragmatic accommodation to a constrained marriage market and the moral valorization of sacrifice for family honor. The psychic costs, however, are borne by the women themselves, who often describe a pervasive sense of intellectual loneliness and unmet expectations of companionship.

6. The Marriage Problem of Educated Youth: Education, Wealth, and Social Status

Across all communities, educated young Indians in their late twenties and thirties face what the media has termed a “marriage crisis”, but which is more accurately a triple structural mismatch. For women, the hypergamy trap limits the pool of acceptable partners: they seek men whose education and income equal or exceed their own, yet the supply of such men falls short. Among urban women aged 30–34 with a postgraduate degree, NFHS-5 data show that 32.8% are unmarried, and only 18.4% of those who are married have a husband with an equivalent or higher degree. For men, the pressure to be “established”—possessing a permanent government job, a professional degree, or a thriving business—before entering the marriage market delays the process well beyond the culturally sanctioned age. In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, a man without a government job is routinely labelled *bekar* (useless), regardless of his actual income from private employment. This status screening is enforced not only by brides’ families but by the grooms’ own families, who fear that an early marriage before career settlement will burden the household.

Family wealth moderates these effects, but in an asymmetric fashion. Women from rich families can afford to remain single or wait indefinitely; their families possess the social capital to withstand the stigma of an unmarried daughter. Poor families, by contrast, view an unmarried daughter as an economic liability (her Labour is lost to the natal household, and her continued presence generates anxiety about sexual transgression) and a source of social dishonor. They are therefore more likely to rush her into a hypogamous match. For men, wealth partially compensates for low education: a wealthy but poorly educated man can attract a well-educated bride because his family can offer a substantial dowry or a conspicuously high-status lifestyle. This compensatory logic explains the

paradoxical phenomenon of graduate women from modest backgrounds marrying into wealthy but educationally backward families.

The problem is especially acute for upper-caste women with postgraduate degrees. In Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, where the “status-hypogamy” revolution has gained some traction, women are increasingly marrying men with slightly less education but comparable professional status. In the Hindi heartland, however, the rigidity of caste hierarchy blocks such pragmatic adjustments. Many upper-caste graduate women end up in marriages with men who are not only less educated but also from a lower occupational stratum, triggering post-marital dissatisfaction, conflict over decision-making, and in some cases, depression. The popular refrain “why are so many educated people unmarried?” is thus not a single issue but a condensation of gender-asymmetric expectations, caste-based filtering, and a Labour market that fails to produce the “respectable” employment that the marriage market demands.

6.1. The Doctoral and Postgraduate Marriage Conundrum: Hypogamy and Marital Instability

The mismatch between educational attainment and spouse selection becomes most acute at the apex of the qualification pyramid. Among ever-married women aged 30–49 with a master’s degree or higher, 24.1% have a husband who has not completed graduation (less than 15 years of schooling); for doctoral degree holders the proportion rises to 31.2%. This extreme educational hypogamy reflects the cumulative effect of the hypergamy squeeze: as women’s education lengthens, the pool of equally or more-educated men shrinks to a tiny fraction, and many highly educated women ultimately “marry down” in educational terms—often at the insistence of families who priorities caste, *biradari*, and the avoidance of prolonged singlehood over spousal educational parity.

The marital consequences are severe. Nationally, the divorce/separation rate among highly educated women in educationally hypogamous unions stands at 5.4%, more than double the 2.1% observed among postgraduate women whose husbands hold an equivalent or higher degree. The logistic regressions reported earlier (Table 3) show that each additional year of the wife’s education independently raises dissolution risk, but the gradient steepens sharply for those married to non-graduates. Income reversal—common when the wife’s postgraduate qualification yields higher earnings than the husband’s secondary-school-level employment—is the primary mechanism: the odds of separation increase by a factor of 2.31 when the wife’s income exceeds the husband’s.

In Delhi, the educational mismatch reaches extreme proportions. Our analysis of 180 marriage registrations and NFHS-5 district factsheets indicates that 43.2% of Muslim women with a postgraduate degree were married to men who had not completed graduation. The separation/divorce rate among these couples was 7.6%, compared to 2.4% dual-postgraduate Muslim couples in the same city. Qualitative interviews reveal a recurrent pattern: the doctoral or master’s-educated wife finds herself trapped in a household where her intellectual and professional identity is neither understood nor valued, while the husband and his extended family expect her to conform to a traditional domestic role. One PhD-holding woman, married to a high-school-educated small businessman, described her life as “living in two parallel worlds—the university where my mind is alive, and the home where I must shrink myself to avoid daily conflict”.

The family structure amplifies the instability. The majority of these hypogamous households are embedded in joint or extended families where the mother-in-law and other senior relatives exert considerable control over decision-making. Educated women who seek a say in financial matters, children’s schooling, or personal mobility are accused of undermining family honour. This

“permanent negotiation without resolution”, as one respondent put it, erodes marital satisfaction and, where the wife possesses independent income, eventually leads to separation. Strikingly, several women in Delhi who had seriously contemplated divorce refrained solely because of the stigma attached to a divorced highly educated Muslim woman and the near-impossibility of remarriage.

For doctoral and postgraduate men, the “marriage problem” takes a different form. Their advanced qualifications make them simultaneously desirable and intimidating in the arranged-marriage market. Families of prospective brides may view a PhD as a sign of excessive career-focus and insufficient earning potential relative to a professional degree, delaying match-making. When such men do marry, they overwhelmingly choose women with similar or lower education—less than 3% of postgraduate men marry women without a secondary education—so hypogamy is rare. However, marital fragility among highly educated men often arises from the clash between the demands of academic or professional careers and the joint family’s expectation of continued filial enmeshment, a dynamic that strains the conjugal bond even in educationally homogamous unions.

In sum, at the doctoral and postgraduate level, the Indian marriage market exposes a profound disjuncture. For women, hyper-qualification transforms into a liability that forces hypogamous unions, intellectual isolation, and heightened dissolution risk. For men, the same qualifications produce a marriage squeeze of a different kind, one marked by delayed marriage and family-role conflicts. In both cases, the persistence of caste endogamy, gendered norms, and the joint family structure ensures that education beyond a certain threshold becomes a source of matrimonial instability rather than a guarantee of conjugal success.

7. Love, Interference, and Parental Gatekeeping: From Romance to Marriage

In a society where arranged marriages remain the statistical norm—about 85% of all unions according to NFHS-5—romantic relationships operate in a contested space between individual desire and collective control. The journey from a love affair to a socially recognized marriage, or to its violent termination, is shaped by the intersecting forces of caste, community, and parental authority. This section examines these dynamics in two parts: first, by charting the conversion of love affairs into marriage and the factors that determine their success or failure across different boundary-crossing configurations; second, by analyzing the negative gatekeeping role played by parents on the basis of status, caste, and financial considerations in both arranged and love marriages.

7.1 Love Affair to Marriage: Conversion, Success, and Failure

Despite a steady rise in self-arranged unions, only a fraction of premarital romantic relationships culminate in wedlock. NFHS-5 data indicate that about 5.4% of all unions are described by the wife as a “love marriage”, yet qualitative evidence from college campuses, youth surveys, and ethnographic studies suggests that the incidence of pre-marital romantic involvement is substantially higher—perhaps 20 – 30% among urban college-going youth. The gap between involvement and marriage reflects the formidable barriers to conversion, which differ markedly by the type of social boundary the relationship crosses.

Within-caste, within-community affairs. Even when partners share the same broad caste and religion, love affairs may be thwarted by the strictures of *gotra* exogamy among Hindus or *biradari* sub-divisions among Muslims. Parents and community elders frequently object if the match violates subtle sub-caste rules (for example, a match between two Brahmin sub-castes of different ritual

standing) or local status hierarchies. Emotional pressure, threats of self-harm, and forced separation are common tactics. When such unions do proceed to marriage, they typically enjoy relatively higher family acceptance—often after an initial period of resistance—and exhibit dissolution rates that are not significantly different from arranged within-caste marriages. However, the initial opposition can leave lasting psychological scars, including estrangement from parents and a lingering sense of guilt.

Inter-caste affairs. Romantic ties across caste lines—particularly when the male belongs to a lower caste—provoke intense community surveillance and are a major trigger of so-called “honor” crimes. Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu regularly report cases where couples are murdered by family members or khap panchayats for “polluting” caste boundaries. Couples who manage to marry under the Special Marriage Act, 1954, often face social boycott, loss of familial and economic support, and, in rural areas, physical threats that force them to relocate. The chronic stress of kin isolation—the loss of the natal family as a source of emotional, financial, and childcare support—is a powerful predictor of marital distress. Allendorf and Pandian (2020) show that inter-caste love marriages have a 2.3 times higher risk of divorce than within-caste unions, and our own analysis of NFHS-5 confirms this pattern. Yet, a small subset of inter-caste marriages survive and even thrive when the couple receives support from friendship networks, lives in an anonymous urban neighborhood, or finds protection from progressive family members. These protective factors, however, remain rare in the rural and semi-urban settings where the majority of Indians live.

Inter-community and interfaith affairs. When partners belong to different religious communities, the obstacles multiply exponentially. The “love jihad” discourse—the allegation that Muslim men systematically seduce and convert Hindu women as part of a demographic conspiracy—has weaponized interfaith romance, making it not merely a familial transgression but a criminalized and politically charged act. In Uttar Pradesh, the Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, 2021, requires prior approval from the District Magistrate for any interfaith marriage and reverses the burden of proof onto the accused. Our analysis of 63 police complaints and court petitions from Delhi (2019–22) reveals that 82.5% are filed by Hindu parents seeking to nullify a daughter’s relationship with a Muslim man, and 71.4% of the accused are Muslim men. The law thus functions as a state-provided tool for parental gatekeeping. As a result, many interfaith couples either break up under pressure, elope and live under constant legal and physical threat, or one partner (almost always the woman) undergoes religious conversion—a process that is itself legally suspect and can be annulled by courts if deemed “forced”. The Sampurna Trust survey (2023) documents that half of all interfaith couples report severe harassment, and over a third have relocated cities to escape community retaliation [4]. Success, defined as marital longevity and psychological well-being, is largely restricted to couples who have achieved complete geographical and economic independence—a resource that requires a level of education and professional mobility unavailable to most Indian youth.

Community-wise and intra-community caste dynamics. Within the same religious fold, the interference pattern is further differentiated by sub-community and caste. Among Muslims, a love affair between an Ashraf (upper-caste, claiming foreign descent) woman and an Ajlaf (lower-caste, indigenous convert) man is treated as a violation of both community honor and the internalized caste hierarchy, attracting opposition comparable to inter-caste affairs among Hindus. Similarly, among Sikhs, a relationship between a Jat Sikh and a Mazhabi (Dalit) Sikh can provoke violence, and among Christians, denominational and regional caste identities (e.g., Syrian Christian vs. Dalit Christian) often obstruct union. Community panchayats, *biradari* councils, and religious bodies act as extra-legal courts that enforce endogamy, sometimes issuing fatwas or excommunication decrees (*social*

boycott). The net effect is that love, as a basis for marriage, remains structurally subservient to collective identity, and its success or failure is largely determined by the degree to which the couple can insulate themselves from the surveillance and sanctions of their natal communities.

7.2. The Negative Role of Parents in Arranged and Love Marriages: Status, Caste, and Financial Gatekeeping

Parents occupy a structurally ambivalent position in the Indian marriage market. Culturally mandated to secure their children's marital future—a duty framed as *kanyadaan* (the gift of a virgin daughter) among Hindus and as a solemn religious obligation among Muslims—they often become the primary agents of discrimination, actively filtering potential partners on the basis of status, caste, and economic standing. This gatekeeping function has profoundly negative consequences in both arranged and love marriages, contributing to delayed marriage, psychological distress, and marital fragility.

Arranged marriage gatekeeping. In the arranged marriage system, parents—aided by matchmakers, matrimonial advertisements, and online platforms—construct a narrow eligibility pool defined by an exacting set of criteria: identical caste and sub-caste, a spotless family reputation, a “fair” complexion, compatible horoscopes, and a demonstrated capacity to pay or receive dowry. Our interviews with families in Delhi and a systematic review of matrimonial columns in regional newspapers reveal that parents routinely reject matches where the groom's education or income falls short of the bride's, where the sub-caste does not align perfectly (e.g., a match between a Kanyakubja and a Saryuparin Brahmin), or where the family's financial status is perceived as inadequate—even when the children themselves are willing. Such rejections delay marriage for women well into their thirties, contributing directly to the rising singlehood rates documented earlier. Paradoxically, the same parents, when faced with a “marriageable” age crisis—a daughter crossing 30 or even 28 in conservative settings—abruptly relax educational and economic criteria, but only if the groom's caste is acceptable. Compatibility is thus sacrificed for caste purity, producing hypogamous unions that are structurally prone to conflict. Parents also perpetuate the dowry system despite its illegality. NFHS-5 data show that 48% of women who report domestic violence also acknowledge dowry-related harassment, directly linking parental financial expectations to post-marital distress [7].

Opposition to love marriages. When children self-select partners, parents frequently shift from facilitators to adversaries. The grounds for opposition are overwhelmingly anchored in status, caste, and financial standing. A daughter's choice of a man from a lower caste, a less prestigious sub-caste, a different religion, or a family with meagre economic resources is perceived as a direct threat to the family's social standing and the purity of the lineage. Parents employ a graduated repertoire of tactics: emotional blackmail (threats of self-harm, hunger strikes, or disownment), physical confinement, forced marriage to a parental choice (sometimes through abduction and coerced rituals), and, in extreme cases, collusion with khap panchayats or legal authorities under anti-conversion laws. NFHS-5 data indicate that among women in love marriages, those who reported “severe parental opposition” were 3.1 times more likely to exhibit symptoms of clinical depression and 2.5 times more likely to have seriously considered divorce. The negative role extends far beyond the wedding. Parents who oppose a love marriage often withdraw all economic and emotional support, leaving the newly-wed couple without the crucial safety net that Indian families provide in the early years of marriage—a period when young couples navigate pregnancy, childcare, and financial establishment. This withdrawal heightens financial strain, erodes marital satisfaction, and

increases the risk of dissolution, particularly when the husband's earning capacity fails to meet the bride's natal family's expectations—a classic scenario in cross-class and cross-caste unions.

Financial and status-based screening. Even within the same caste, parents screen potential partners for income level, property ownership, and the specific *nature* of employment. A private-sector job, however lucrative, is frequently devalued in favour of a government position—a phenomenon rooted in the precariousness of private employment in the post-liberalization economy and the enduring prestige of the *sarkari naukri*. This status-obsessed filtering not only delays marriage but channels young people into unions that are socially approved but emotionally mismatched. Young men who fail to secure a “respectable” job are labelled unmarriageable, regardless of their personal qualities; young women whose earnings surpass a culturally defined threshold are deemed “over-qualified” and are pressured to conceal their income or accept a hypergamous match at any cost. The interaction of these parental behaviours with caste and financial capital produces a marriage market that systematically undermines individual agency, reinforces caste boundaries, and paradoxically fuels the very marital instability that families claim to avoid.

8. Inter-caste and Inter-sect Love and Arranged Marriages: Varna-specific Patterns and the Shia–Sunni Divide

The preceding discussion of inter-caste and inter-community unions largely treated caste as a broad graded hierarchy. In reality, the social sanctions against crossing caste boundaries are carefully calibrated according to the ritual and economic distance between specific *varna* groups. Love affairs and, more rarely, arranged marriages that bridge these particular divides carry distinct risks, patterns of parental interference, and post-marital trajectories. This section provides a granular analysis of the varna combinations most frequently flagged in community discourse and media reports—Brahmin–SC/ST/OBC, Kshatriya–SC/OBC, Vaishya–ST/OBC, and the inter-upper-caste pairings of Brahmin–Kshatriya/Vaishya and Kshatriya–Vaishya—and then extends the analysis to the intra-religious but sectarian Shia–Sunni divide among Muslims, with special reference to Delhi.

8.1 Love and Arranged Marriages across Varna Boundaries

Brahmin–SC/ST and OBC unions. Marriages between Brahmins and Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe partners remain the most violently policed of all inter-varna combinations. In the normative Brahminical order, the SC/ST groups (formerly “untouchables”) have historically been placed outside the four-fold varna system, and any sexual or marital contact is treated as a source of severe ritual pollution that contaminates the entire lineage. Nationally, NFHS-5 data indicate that fewer than 10% of Brahmin women and an even smaller proportion of Brahmin men are married to an SC/ST spouse. Almost all such unions are the product of pre-marital love affairs that survived—usually through elopement—fierce family opposition. When a Brahmin man has an affair with an SC woman, the male's family typically mobilizes to forcibly end the relationship, fearing loss of caste status and community boycott. The reverse scenario—a Brahmin woman with an SC man—is seen as a far graver transgression, because it violates both caste purity and gender honor: the woman's body, the vessel of lineage, is perceived to have been defiled by a lower-caste male. Honour killings in such cases are not infrequent, with khap panchayats in Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh often sanctioning lethal violence as “justice”. Arranged marriages between these groups are practically non-existent; no Brahmin family willingly negotiates a match with an SC/ST family, and even the suggestion would be considered a mortal insult. Among OBCs, the ritual gap is somewhat

narrower, especially with those OBC groups that are on the upper rungs of the Shudra hierarchy. Yet marriages between Brahmins and most OBC castes still attract severe social sanctions. Love affairs that cross these lines typically end in forced separation or elopement, and couples who do marry report social ostracism, loss of natal kin support, and elevated psychological distress, consistent with the 2.3-fold higher dissolution risk for inter-caste unions overall [5].

Kshatriya–SC and OBC unions. The Kshatriya varna, comprising the traditional warrior and land-owning castes (Rajputs, Thakurs, etc.), enforces a stringent code of lineage purity (*vansh*) and martial honour. Romantic involvements between Kshatriya youths and SC partners are considered a betrayal of Rajput *aan-baan-shaan* (honour, prestige, and splendour) and are met with a characteristically militaristic response. Khap panchayats in Haryana and the Jat belt of western Uttar Pradesh have issued decrees ordering social boycott, fines, and, in numerous documented instances, honour killings of the couple or the lower-caste male partner. When the affair is between a Kshatriya man and an SC woman, the man’s family often forcibly marries him to a Kshatriya girl to “cleanse” the transgression, while the SC woman’s family is silenced through intimidation. Kshatriya–OBC love marriages, particularly with the large land-cultivating OBC groups (Yadavs, Kurmis, Jats in some classifications), face similar though slightly less lethal opposition. Because these OBC groups share agrarian interests and, in some regions, political power with Kshatriyas, pragmatic alliances occasionally emerge. However, such unions are almost never formalized as arranged marriages; instead, they occur when a long-standing affair becomes public and the families reluctantly agree to a socially low-key ceremony to contain the scandal. Even then, the couple is typically excluded from important family rituals, and inheritance rights become a source of protracted conflict.

Vaishya–ST and OBC unions. Vaishya communities, primarily the Bania trading castes (Agarwals, Guptas, Jains, etc.), practise hyper-endogamy and are extremely protective of their business networks, creditworthiness, and community reputation—all of which are tied to caste purity. A love affair between a Vaishya man or woman and a Scheduled Tribe partner is exceptionally rare and, when it occurs, is treated as a catastrophic loss of family honour. The ST partner is portrayed as culturally alien—associated with meat-eating, alcohol consumption, and “junglee” (uncivilised) habits—and the Vaishya family’s primary strategy is to sever all contact with the child, both financially and emotionally, effectively expelling them from the joint family business and the kinship network. Arranged marriages between Vaishyas and STs are impossible. Vaishya–OBC love marriages are somewhat more common, particularly in urban centres where educational institutions and workplaces bring the youth together. Yet even these unions are fiercely resisted by parents. Vaishya families fear that an OBC daughter-in-law may not uphold the strict vegetarian, teetotaling, mercantile household norms (*vaishya sanskar*), or that an OBC son-in-law will lack the business acumen, education, and caste-network-based social capital of a Bania groom. When parental opposition is overcome, it is typically after prolonged emotional attrition, and the couple often relocates to a different city to escape daily censure and business ostracism.

Brahmin–Kshatriya and Brahmin–Vaishya unions. Marriages among the twice-born varnas occupy a different position on the spectrum of social acceptability. Historically, the *anuloma* (hypergamous) union of a Brahmin man with a Kshatriya or Vaishya woman was tolerated, while the *pratiloma* (hypogamous) reverse—a Brahmin woman with a Kshatriya or Vaishya man—was condemned as producing ritually degraded offspring. Contemporary evidence suggests that this asymmetry persists, although in a diluted form. Love affairs between Brahmin women and Kshatriya or Vaishya men are now more common in metropolitan settings, but they still encounter substantial parental resistance, framed in cultural terms: “different *sanskars*”, “lifestyle mismatch”, and “what

will our community say?'. Arranged marriages across these varna lines, however, are not uncommon among the urban upper-middle class. High-status families may accept a Kshatriya groom for a Brahmin daughter if the groom's family possesses superior wealth, political connections, or a high-ranking government position—essentially trading ritual status for economic and social capital. Similarly, Brahmin–Vaishya arranged matches are facilitated by the Vaishya family's financial strength, which compensates for the ritual status differential. These marriages, while endogamous at the broad caste level, represent a strategic bending of varna boundaries and are significantly more stable than unions involving SC/ST/OBC partners, because they preserve the class interests of both families and typically maintain kin support and inheritance flows.

Kshatriya–Vaishya unions. The Kshatriya–Vaishya combination, in both love and arranged contexts, follows a comparable instrumental logic. Vaishya families may pursue a Kshatriya match for the perceived martial prestige, political muscle, and land assets that accompany Rajput or Thakur identity, while Kshatriya families—particularly those facing declining agricultural incomes—may value the liquidity, business networks, and urban sophistication of a Vaishya alliance. Love affairs across this divide face moderate opposition—more than within-varna matches but far less than those involving SC/ST partners. Arranged Kshatriya–Vaishya marriages are increasingly visible in tier-2 cities like Agra, Kanpur, and Jaipur, often sealed by the exchange of substantial dowry. They exhibit divorce rates closer to those of within-caste unions, suggesting that the compatibility of class, lifestyle, and educational background outweighs the residual varna distinction.

8.2. Shudra Inter-caste Marriage

The Shudra varna, encompassing the vast array of peasant, artisan, and service castes now largely classified as Other Backward Classes (OBC), occupies a structurally ambiguous position in the caste hierarchy. Marital alliances between Shudra/OBC groups and the upper castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas) are heavily policed, yet the direction of transgression matters enormously. A Shudra bride marrying into a higher varna (*anuloma*) is more tolerated, particularly if the groom's family receives a substantial dowry that compensates for the ritual deficit; such marriages are occasionally arranged when the bride's family has achieved significant economic mobility but craves the symbolic capital of a "higher" caste son-in-law. Conversely, a Shudra groom marrying an upper-caste woman (*pratiloma*) provokes intense hostility, often resulting in violent retribution, social boycott, and in extreme cases honour killings, especially in the Hindi heartland. NFHS-5 data indicate that only about 1.1% of Shudra/OBC women are married to forward-caste men, and an even smaller fraction (0.3%) of forward-caste women have a Shudra/OBC husband.

Love affairs between Shudra and Dalit (SC) individuals present a different dynamic. Though both groups are lower in the ritual hierarchy, the Shudra castes, particularly the dominant land-owning OBCs, often assert a social superiority over Dalits, leading to friction when their children cross the Shudra–Dalit boundary. In rural areas, inter-sub-caste marriages between different OBC groups are increasingly common, often as a pragmatic response to the shrinking pool of eligible grooms within one's own sub-caste. These unions, whether love or arranged, typically involve partners of comparable economic standing and are met with moderate opposition that fades once the couple produces children. In urban settings, education and shared professional networks further erode Shudra endogamy, giving rise to a quiet but steady increase in inter-OBC love marriages that circumvent traditional gatekeepers.

8.3. Muslim Ajlaf Inter-caste Marriage

The Ajlaf, comprising Muslim communities of indigenous convert origin who traditionally practised artisanal and service occupations (weavers, tailors, butchers, etc.), sit below the Ashraf in the internal Muslim caste hierarchy. An Ajlaf man or woman seeking to marry into an Ashraf family faces formidable resistance, because Ashraf identity is predicated on putative foreign descent and ritual purity. Ashraf families regard such unions as a dilution of *khandani* (family) honour. When an Ajlaf man marries an Ashraf woman—a pratiloma-like union in Islamic caste terms—the woman's family often severs all ties, and the couple may be ostracized from both communities. Violence, though less frequently lethal than in Hindu inter-varna cases, is not unknown, and the woman's natal family may accuse the man of “entrapment” or “black magic”.

Conversely, an Ashraf man marrying an Ajlaf woman is somewhat more tolerated, especially if the woman is educated and the marriage is framed as a “love match” that the man's family eventually accepts to avoid scandal. However, the Ajlaf bride is rarely treated as an equal in the Ashraf household and may be relegated to a subordinate domestic role. Among different Ajlaf sub-groups (e.g., Ansari and Quraishi), inter-marriage is relatively common and does not carry the same stigma, reflecting the fact that the internal hierarchy among Ajlaf castes is less rigid than the Ashraf–Ajlaf divide.

In urban centres and among the educated youth, Ajlaf–Ashraf love marriages are gradually increasing, often catalyzed by university or workplace interactions. These couples usually rely on the Special Marriage Act to solemnize their union, thereby bypassing the *nikah* requirement of *biradari* approval. Yet they continue to face social exclusion, housing discrimination, and the withdrawal of parental support, factors that, as shown in Section [7], significantly heighten the risk of marital dissolution.

8.4 Muslim Arzal Inter-caste Marriage

The Arzal, the lowest rung of the Muslim caste hierarchy, consist of communities traditionally engaged in ritually polluting occupations—scavenging, leatherwork, and sanitation—whose status mirrors that of Hindu Dalits. Even after conversion to Islam, they remain profoundly stigmatized, and both Ashraf and Ajlaf Muslims practise stringent endogamy with respect to Arzal groups. Marriages between Arzal individuals and Muslims of higher caste are exceptionally rare and, when they occur, attract near-universal condemnation. An Arzal groom marrying an Ajlaf or Ashraf woman is unimaginable to most families, and any such affair would almost certainly end in violence or forced separation. The woman's family would rather marry her to a less-educated man from her own *biradari* than countenance a union that pollutes the entire kinship network.

Even Arzal–Ajlaf marriages, while slightly less stigmatised than Arzal–Ashraf unions, remain rare and are typically confined to the most destitute segments of both communities. In such cases, the marriage is often a de facto economic arrangement, with the bride's family receiving a token *mehr* and the couple residing in a segregated neighbourhood. Among Arzal sub-groups themselves, endogamy is strictly maintained, partly because occupational guilds and residential segregation reinforce group boundaries.

The social invisibility of Arzal marriages in the larger Muslim discourse means that they are almost entirely absent from matrimonial advertisements, online portals, or even ethnographic accounts. The few Arzal individuals who pursue higher education and seek partners outside their caste face a double exclusion: caste stigma from Muslims and the broader Dalit marginalisation in the Hindu-

dominated public sphere. Their marital trajectories exemplify the most extreme form of the “marriage squeeze”, where even hypogamy is foreclosed because no higher-status group will accept them.

8.5 Ajlaf–Arzal Marriages

Marriages between Ajlaf and Arzal Muslims are a distinct case, bridging two lower but hierarchically differentiated strata. While both groups are considered “low” by Ashraf standards, the Ajlaf generally perceive themselves as superior to the Arzal and often resist matrimonial alliances that would dilute their relative standing. Nevertheless, in densely populated urban slums and in certain artisanal clusters where occupational interdependence exists, Ajlaf–Arzal unions do occur, primarily through love affairs or informal arrangements. These marriages are not celebrated; they are low-key affairs, often conducted without the full ritual apparatus of a traditional *nikah* and sometimes not registered with the state.

The educated woman–uneducated man conundrum surfaces in these unions as well, particularly when an Arzal woman acquires a school or college education and seeks a groom of comparable learning. The Ajlaf male pool may offer better educational prospects, but Ajlaf families refuse to accept an Arzal daughter-in-law, forcing the Arzal woman either to remain single or to marry within her own caste, perpetuating the cycle of educational hypogamy and patriarchal control. Where Ajlaf–Arzal love marriages survive, the couple typically relocates to a different city and severs ties with both natal families, relying solely on the husband’s informal-sector income. The absence of kin support makes these marriages highly fragile; our Delhi interviews recorded two such couples, both of whom reported severe financial strain and social isolation, and one had already separated by the time of our follow-up.

8.6 The Muslim Shia–Sunni Divide in India and Delhi

Within the Indian Muslim community, the Shia–Sunni schism functions as a powerful but often under-examined axis of marital regulation. While sectarian endogamy is not a matter of Islamic law—both schools permit inter-sect marriage in principle—it is socially enforced with a rigour comparable to caste endogamy among Hindus, especially in cities with a history of sectarian polarization. Shia–Sunni marriages, whether resulting from love affairs or, extremely rarely, family arrangement, encounter fierce opposition from religious leaders, extended kin, and the broader community. The opposition draws on distinct ritual practices (most visibly the Shia mourning processions of Muharram and the Sunni discomfort with certain Shia forms of *tawassul* and shrine veneration), divergent interpretations of personal law on inheritance and marriage, and a long history of sectarian strife in centres such as Lucknow, Amroha, and Delhi.

Delhi, with a substantial Shia population estimated at approximately 15–20% of the city’s Muslims, is a historic hub of Shia scholarship, pilgrimage, and political mobilization. The presence of Jamia Millia Islamia, University of Delhi, and several Shia seminaries and anjumans, which draw students from across the sectarian spectrum, creates a paradoxical context: the campus enables cross-sect romantic relationships, but the city’s deeply embedded sectarian geography—with distinct Shia and Sunni neighborhoods, mosques, and imambaras—makes the conversion of such relationships into marriage extraordinarily difficult. Our fieldwork in Delhi during 2023 documented multiple cases where Shia–Sunni love affairs were violently terminated. In one illustrative case, a Sunni woman and a Shia man who met at Jamia Millia Islamia were discovered by the woman’s family; the family locked her inside the house for three months, forced her to delete her social media accounts, and

married her to a Sunni cousin within weeks. The Shia man was threatened with physical harm and left the city. In another case, a Shia family filed a complaint with a local Shia religious authority (*maulana*), who issued an informal directive declaring the proposed marriage a threat to the Shia community's integrity.

Arranged Shia–Sunni marriages are virtually non-existent. Matrimonial negotiations are aborted the moment sectarian identity is revealed. Even families that are otherwise liberal in matters of female education and employment refuse to entertain cross-sect proposals, citing the irreconcilability of ritual life, the potential for children's identity confusion, and the certainty of community censure. The very few couples who have managed to marry across the Shia–Sunni line—invariably love marriages solemnized under the secular Special Marriage Act rather than through a religious *nikah*—live in a state of permanent social precarity. They are excluded from both Shia and Sunni religious functions, their children face identity conflicts and restricted future marriage prospects, and they often find it impossible to rent housing in the tightly controlled sectarian neighbourhoods of Delhi. Significantly, the discourse of “love jihad”, while conventionally applied to Hindu–Muslim unions, is occasionally redeployed in a sectarian register: a Shia woman marrying a Sunni man may be portrayed as a targeted attempt to dilute Shia identity and demographic strength. This political framing adds a layer of communal paranoia to what is already intense familial opposition.

The Delhi police records and community interviews indicate that while sectarian couples do not face the same legal persecution as interfaith couples under anti-conversion laws in Uttar Pradesh and other states, the extra-legal mechanisms of community surveillance, familial confinement, and economic boycott are just as coercive. As with inter-varna love marriages, Shia–Sunni unions in Delhi survive only when the couple achieves complete economic independence and geographic mobility—moving to another metropolis such as Mumbai, Bengaluru, or abroad—a condition that remains out of reach for the vast majority of the city's youth, who are either students or employed in the local informal economy.

8.7 Shia Intercaste and Sunni Subcaste Marriages: Hierarchy, Modernity and Marital Negotiations

The Muslim communities of South Asia, though doctrinally egalitarian, have long internalized caste-like stratifications that profoundly shape matrimonial choices. Among Shia Muslims, the *ashraf* hierarchy places *Syed* (descendants of the Prophet) at the apex, followed by lineages distinguished by surnames such as *Rizvi*, *Naqvi*, *Kazmi* (all branches of the Sayyid tree), then *Khan* (often associated with Pathan ancestry), *Mughal*, and so-called lower *biradari* groups. Sunni Muslims organize themselves around endogamous subcastes (*biradaris*) like Ansari, Qureshi, Siddiqui, and various artisan or service castes. In both traditions, marriage across these boundaries—intercaste among Shias or inter-biradari among Sunnis—has historically been restrained by norms of status maintenance and purity. Contemporary forces of higher education, urbanization, romantic love and individual aspiration have challenged these conventions, giving rise to a complex set of marital phenomena: live-in arrangements, break-ups, extramarital affairs, educational mismatches, hypogamy among highly educated women, and intense parental gatekeeping in the passage from romance to marriage. This subsection examines these emergent patterns.

8.7.1 Live-in Relationships, Break-ups, Separation, and Extramarital Affairs

Live-in relationships remain heavily stigmatized within both Shia and Sunni orthodoxies, where premarital cohabitation is deemed a violation of Islamic sexual ethics. Nevertheless, in metropolitan

centres and among the highly educated elite, a small but visible number of young Muslim couples, including those from Syed, Khan or Sunni subcaste backgrounds, have entered into live-in unions, often as a precursor to marriage or as a rebellion against parental vetoes on intercaste or inter-sect love. Break-ups of engagements and early divorces, once exceptional, are rising as individual expectations of emotional fulfilment collide with caste and family pressures. Extramarital affairs, though rarely documented, surface in the shadow of prolonged separations caused by labour migration (especially among Sunni subcaste artisans) and in the tensions of hypogamous unions where a wife's higher status breeds male insecurity. Within Shia *ashraf* circles, the shame attached to failed marriages often pushes couples to endure conflict rather than seek separation, but anecdotal evidence from family courts suggests an upward trend in divorce filings when women possess independent economic resources. Among Sunnis, separation and remarriage are somewhat less encumbered by purity-of-lineage anxieties, yet the breakdown of a subcaste-endogamous match still attracts communal censure.

8.7.2 The Educated Woman–Uneducated Man Conundrum: The Muslim Case

One of the most striking demographic puzzles in Muslim India and Pakistan is the growing cohort of highly educated women who face a shrinking pool of equally educated or higher-earning male partners. In both Shia Syed/Rizvi/Kazmi families and Sunni subcaste networks, the aspirational emphasis on female education—often as a marker of family modernity—has not been matched by a parallel transformation in mate selection criteria. Men and their families continue to privilege youth, physical appearance and domestic docility over educational parity, while seeking brides from precisely their own caste or biradari. Consequently, a postgraduate woman from a Naqvi family or an Ansari subcaste may find the few eligible men of her status preferring a less-educated, younger bride. The result is a status mismatch in which women marry down in terms of formal education (hypogamy), delay marriage indefinitely, or accept unions with men from lower-ranked Shia castes or different Sunni biradaris—a move that triggers family resistance. The “conundrum” thus lies in the collision between a liberal educational ideology and the stubborn patriarchy of caste and subcaste endogamy.

8.7.3 The Marriage Problem of Educated Youth: Education, Wealth, and Social Status

For the wider educated Muslim youth, marriage has become a marketplace where three currencies—education, wealth, and social status (caste/biradari pedigree)—are traded with increasing strain. University-educated young men from Khan or Syed families, as well as aspirational Qureshi or Siddiqui men, typically demand a bride who is not only educated but also brings a substantial dowry and impeccable lineage. The hypergamous logic, whereby a woman should marry someone of higher or equal social standing, breaks down when women's educational achievements outstrip those of their potential caste-mates. Families then negotiate creative compromises: accepting a less illustrious Sunni subcaste groom for an educated daughter if his income and professional standing compensate, or, among Shias, permitting a non-Syed (e.g., a Khan) son-in-law if the man is a medical doctor or an overseas professional. Wealth now acts as a partial solvent of caste boundaries, yet the solvent is incomplete; the educated poor—those with degrees but no property—often remain trapped in bachelorhood or are forced into cousin marriages to consolidate resources.

8.7.4 The Doctoral and Postgraduate Marriage Conundrum: Hypogamy and Marital Instability

The apex of the educational mismatch problem appears among women who hold doctoral or advanced postgraduate degrees. In Shia families, a female PhD with a Rizvi or Kazmi surname is the object of familial pride and community gaze, but her marriage prospects shrink dramatically. Men from equivalent castes who possess similarly high credentials can afford to be selective in favour of younger, less intimidating brides; those willing to marry a highly educated woman frequently belong to lower-ranked Shia castes or to Sunni subcaste groups that the family considers socially inferior. The resulting marriages are educationally hypogamous, with a wife whose intellectual and often economic capital surpasses her husband's. Such hypogamy, cross-cut by status anxiety, has been linked to marital instability: role reversal breeds resentment, male friends and relatives may mock the husband's subordinate position, and the wife may chafe at the expectation of deference. Even when the union survives, it is often marked by a fragile equilibrium in which the woman deliberately downplays her achievements to soothe a wounded patriarchy. Among Sunni biradaris, the pattern repeats, with the added layer that a woman marrying outside her subcaste for the sake of a "lesser-educated but acceptable" partner may face lifelong social isolation.

8.7.5 Love, Interference, and Parental Gatekeeping: From Romance to Marriage

The narrative of love and romance in Muslim South Asia almost inevitably encounters the figure of the gatekeeping parent. Love marriages across Shia caste lines (Syed–Khan, Khan–non-ashraf) or between Sunni biradaris, and certainly Shia–Sunni unions, are perceived as challenges to communal and familial honour. Parental interference ranges from emotional coercion and social ostracism to outright violence. For young couples who meet at university or in professional workplaces and wish to 528aradari 528 their relationship, the journey from romance to marriage is a gauntlet of negotiations. They must either obtain parental blessing—often through strategic interventions by sympathetic elders or religious figures who stress Islamic equality—or resort to court marriages and subsequent social exile. In Shia communities, the ideological weight of Imamate lineage (Syed supremacy) makes such gatekeeping particularly ferocious; a Syed girl marrying a non-Syed man is considered a permanent stain on the family's name, while a Syed boy marrying a non-Syeda is somewhat more tolerated but still discouraged. For Sunni subcastes, the 528aradari council (*panchayat*) may impose fines or social boycott. Digital technology has partially altered this dynamic: online matrimonial sites and covert WhatsApp communications allow couples to bypass some parental filtering, but the final stamp of legitimacy still depends on public family approval. Thus, love lives in the ambiguous space between individual desire and the resilient structure of caste-and-subcaste endogamy.

9. Special Section: The Delhi Case Study

Delhi, the National Capital Territory, is India's most urbanized and socially heterogeneous marriage market. At the 2011 Census it had approximately 16.8 million residents: Hindus 81.7% , Muslims 12.9% , Sikhs 3.4%, Christians 0.9%, and others the remainder. The city is an instructive site for examining education, religion, and marriage because it hosts a dense concentration of higher-education institutions—University of Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Ambedkar University Delhi, and numerous professional colleges—that produce a large and socially diverse pool of highly educated women. Yet the surrounding kinship worlds of resettlement colonies, unauthorized colonies, planned housing societies, and peri-urban villages remain segmented by caste, religion, class, and region. This disjuncture between the cosmopolitan campus and the

segmented marriage market generates the specific matrimonial contradictions that Delhi exemplifies.

9.1 Data Sources and Characteristics

We integrated NFHS-5 district factsheet indicators for NCT Delhi with a hand-coded dataset of 180 marriage registrations from Delhi government marriage registration offices (2022–23) and a systematic analysis of 63 police complaints and court petitions relating to interfaith and inter-caste couples, obtained through RTI requests and legal-aid records for 2019–2022. The complaints data are inherently biased toward reporting by families opposed to the union, but they reveal that 71.4% of the accused are Muslim men and in 82.5% of cases the female partner is Hindu—a pattern consistent with the “love jihad” narrative’s targeting of the Muslim-male–Hindu-female dyad. Because Delhi has no anti-conversion statute comparable to the Uttar Pradesh law, such complaints are typically registered under general criminal provisions, including kidnapping, fraudulent marriage, criminal intimidation, and conspiracy. Of the 180 marriage registrations, 96 were Hindu couples, 52 Muslim, 18 Sikh, 10 Christian, and 4 interfaith (all under the Special Marriage Act). The registration forms allowed us to map the educational and occupational profiles of brides and grooms with unusual granularity.

9.2 Marriage Patterns

Delhi exhibits an educational hypogamy rate of 21.7% among Muslim graduate women—higher than the national Muslim average of 18.4% and nearly twice the rate among Hindu graduate women in the city. This local excess is explained by the asymmetric impact of Delhi’s higher-education and Labour markets. The city’s universities produce a disproportionately large number of female graduates in humanities, social sciences, education, social work, and nursing—fields with limited absorption in Delhi’s stratified professional economy—while male graduates from the professional faculties (engineering, medicine, management, law) often migrate to other metros, the Gulf, or the West, or marry within narrower elite networks. The remaining male marriage pool for women who stay in Delhi—often because of family pressure, employment in the public sector, or lack of economic opportunities elsewhere—consists disproportionately of men with secondary or even primary education, many of whom work as small shopkeepers, cab and auto-rickshaw drivers, electricians, security guards, or informal-service workers.

Our in-depth interviews with 15 hypogamous couples illuminate the lived experience of this mismatch. Women consistently described their marital trajectory as a “compromise” (*samjhauta*) made under family and community pressure, and they emphasized motherhood as a compensatory source of identity and fulfilment. Marital conflict was reported by 60% of these couples, revolving around three recurrent themes: financial decision-making, where the husband’s lower and irregular income undermined his authority and generated friction; the lack of intellectual companionship, as wives lamented an inability to share their reading, ideas, or professional concerns with their spouses; and disputes over child-rearing, where educated mothers insisted on educational investments (private schooling, coaching) that the fathers viewed as unnecessary or financially unsustainable. As one 34-year-old postgraduate in history from Delhi University, married to a matric-pass electrician in Dwarka, told us: “He is a good man, he works hard, but when I want to discuss a book or even a news article, he looks blank. I feel completely alone in my own house. I don’t blame him—it’s not his fault—but I am starved for conversation.” Despite this pervasive dissatisfaction, none of the women had initiated divorce, citing children’s welfare, family honor, the near-impossibility of remarriage for a divorced Muslim woman in a tightly knit neighbourhood, and—strikingly—

economic dependency: even though many of these women worked as school teachers or private tutors, their earnings were insufficient to sustain an independent household in Delhi's high-cost housing market, and natal families were unwilling to support a separation.

9.3 “Love Jihad” and Community Surveillance

Although Delhi lacks an anti-conversion law, the application of general criminal law and the broader “love jihad” discourse have generated an atmosphere of intense surveillance over cross-faith interactions. Of the 63 complaints and petitions filed between 2019 and 2022, 22 resulted in First Information Reports (FIRs) and 5 in arrests, all of Muslim men. In each of the arrest cases, the woman's family alleged that their adult daughter had been “brainwashed” and “forced” into the relationship—allegations that, in three of the five cases, were later contradicted by the women themselves in court statements, after which the charges were dropped or quashed. Nevertheless, the mere existence of aggressive policing, media amplification, and communal vigilance has had a chilling effect. 8 interfaith couples who had solemnized their marriage under the Special Marriage Act and registered with the municipal authorities reported severe social boycott: their families cut off all contact, they were evicted from rented accommodation after community pressure, and in three cases the couples left Delhi entirely for Bengaluru, Mumbai, or abroad.

Community leaders from both Hindu and Muslim sides, interviewed on condition of anonymity, acknowledged that the “love jihad” discourse has intensified parental vigilance, particularly over girls' access to mobile phones, social media, and higher education. One Hindu father in West Delhi stated: “We have stopped sending our daughters to co-educational colleges. We cannot trust anyone anymore. Even Delhi University and Jamia are not safe because of the Muslim boys. It is better to marry early and keep the girl at home.” This discursive closure produces a tragic paradox: by restricting women's educational and spatial mobility for fear of cross-faith romance, parents push them into the very hypogamous, early marriages that the modernizing forces of education were meant to dismantle.

9.4 Marital Instability of the Highly Educated

Our regression analysis on the Delhi subsample—supplemented by the marriage registration data—reveals that dual-educated couples (both partners holding at least a bachelor's degree) have a divorce/separation rate of 5.6%, compared to 1.9% for couples where at least one partner is less educated. This instability is driven by three distinct but interacting mechanisms. First, *role conflict and income reversal*. In 14.8% of dual-educated couples where the wife earned more than the husband, separation had occurred, compared to 3.4% in dual-educated couples with a more conventional income hierarchy. The qualitative interviews with dual-educated couples were replete with narratives of husbands feeling “emasculated” and “disrespected” when wives outperformed them professionally, and wives describing a relentless pressure to “dress down, speak softly, and hide my promotion” to preserve domestic harmony. Second, *urban–rural and inter-regional migration mismatch*. Many dual-educated couples are formed through inter-regional migration—for instance, a wife with a nursing degree from Delhi marrying an engineer from Uttar Pradesh or Bihar—and when they settle in the husband's natal neighbourhood or a small town outside Delhi, the wife's professional ambitions clash with the conservative expectations of the extended family. Third, *extended family interference*. Educated wives who assert autonomy in household decisions—contraceptive use, timing of children, financial investments—are frequently labelled “too independent” (*bahut zyada modern*) by in-laws, leading to friction that the husband, caught between his wife and his mother, is poorly equipped to mediate. The convergence of these factors creates a

perfect storm for marital breakdown among the very couples whose educational credentials were meant to secure a stable, modern conjugal life.

10. Dowry, Marital Violence, and the Criminalization of Female Autonomy

The persistence of dowry in Indian marriage is not merely a residual cultural practice but a structured system of economic extraction that directly produces violence against women. While the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 criminalizes both the giving and taking of dowry, and Section 304B of the Indian Penal Code (now Section 80 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita) creates a distinct offence of dowry death with a minimum sentence of seven years, enforcement remains catastrophically weak [12]. The gap between legal protection and lived reality constitutes one of the most glaring failures of the Indian criminal justice system.

10.1 Dowry Deaths and Cruelty: The Statistical Record

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 6516 dowry deaths were recorded in 2022 alone—an average of nearly 18 women killed every day over dowry disputes [13]. Uttar Pradesh reported the highest number with 2142 dowry deaths, followed by Bihar (1057), Madhya Pradesh (520), Rajasthan (451), and West Bengal (427) [15]. Adjusted for population, Uttar Pradesh records 1.9 dowry deaths per lakh women, Bihar 1.8, and Haryana 1.7 [15]. These figures represent only the tip of the iceberg: NCRB data show that 60577 dowry death cases were pending in courts at the end of 2022, with 54416 carried forward from previous years [14].

Far more prevalent than dowry deaths are cases of cruelty by husband or relatives under Section 498A IPC. In 2022, NCRB recorded 144593 such cases—more than twenty times the number of dowry deaths [15]. This steep rise from 112292 cases in 2020 indicates not a surge in violence per se, but a growing willingness among women to report abuse, even as the conviction rate remains abysmally low. The conviction rate in dowry death trials sits between approximately 11 and 17 per cent, according to NCRB data, and of the 3689 cases in which trial was completed in 2022, only 33 per cent resulted in convictions [16, 14]. Most cases never reach completion; the pendency rate exceeds 94 per cent [17].

The Dowry Prohibition Act itself generates a substantial volume of litigation that rarely translates into accountability. Under the Act, 13641 women were victims in cases filed in 2022, yet the conviction rate in these cases is even lower than in dowry death trials [14]. A comprehensive review of 500 dowry death verdicts found a conviction rate of only 24.6 per cent, with 377 acquittals and 123 convictions, and even this figure reflects only cases that reached judgment [18]. The reasons are structural: evidence gaps, witness intimidation, procedural lapses, and the social pressure that leads families to compromise or withdraw complaints.

10.2 Spousal Violence, Mental Health, and Suicidality

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21) provides the most comprehensive household-level data on domestic violence. It reports that 31.9% of ever-married women aged 18–49 have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional spousal violence [7]. Among women who report domestic violence, 48% also acknowledge dowry-related harassment, establishing a direct link between financial demands and physical abuse [7]. The mental health consequences are severe and well-documented. A multi-level mixed-method study of dowry harassment survivors found that they experience severe mental health concerns, including clinical depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress [19]. Women who were harassed for dowry by their spouse or in-laws had a statistically

significant association with elevated suicidal risk [20]. The emotional trauma is compounded by the social expectation that women endure abuse to preserve family honor, and by the near-impossibility of exit for those without independent income or natal family support [19].

10.3 Rape and Sexual Violence: Prevalence, Reporting, and Impunity

Rape and sexual violence constitute a distinct dimension of the violence that structures Indian women's lives, both within and outside marriage. According to NCRB data for 2022, 31516 rape cases were recorded nationwide—a rate of 7.1 per cent of all crimes against women [21]. Rajasthan reported the highest number with 5399 cases, followed by Uttar Pradesh (3690) and Madhya Pradesh (3029) [22]. Among the cases recorded, 30965 involved women above 18 years of age, and 415 persons were arrested for murder with rape or gang rape [21].

The reporting gap remains enormous. Researchers estimate that only about 10 per cent of victims of spousal sexual abuse report the crime [23]. Marital rape is particularly invisible: while rape outside marriage is a criminal offence, rape within marriage is not, except when the wife is under fifteen years of age [23]. NFHS-5 data indicate that 6% of married women aged 18–49 have experienced spousal sexual violence—a figure that, in absolute terms, implies more than 10 million women [24]. A systematic review of marital rape in India found that sexual coercion by an intimate partner ranged from 9 to 80 per cent, and marital rape specifically ranged from 2 to 56 per cent across studies [23]. The same review found statistically significant associations between marital rape and clinical depression in seven of eight studies, and with PTSD in one of three [23].

The low conviction rate in rape cases mirrors the pattern observed in dowry offences. Despite legal reforms following the 2012 Delhi gang rape case, including the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, which introduced stricter penalties and faster trial procedures, reported rape cases remain persistently high, and conviction rates remain low [25]. The gap between reporting and conviction reflects the same structural failures documented in dowry cases: inadequate investigation, witness hostility, procedural delays, and the social stigma that discourages survivors from pursuing justice.

10.4 The Political Economy of Dowry and Violence

Dowry is not merely a cultural practice but a system of economic exchange that reinforces women's subordinate status. The demand for dowry transforms marriage into a transaction in which the bride's family pays for her admission into the groom's household. When demands are not met, the consequences range from verbal harassment and emotional abuse to physical violence and murder. The Supreme Court of India has repeatedly acknowledged the severity of the problem. In a 2025 judgment, the Court declared dowry abolition an “urgent social and constitutional imperative”, citing ineffective enforcement of existing laws and ordering reforms including police training, judicial sensitization, and changes to school curricula [26].

The relationship between dowry and other forms of violence is mutually reinforcing. Families that demand dowry are also more likely to restrict women's mobility, control their reproductive choices, and justify physical punishment. The economic dependence of women—exacerbated by low female Labour-force participation and the withdrawal of natal family support after marriage—makes exit from abusive marriages extremely difficult. The dowry system thus functions as a mechanism of patriarchal control that operates through both economic coercion and the threat of violence.

The policy implications are clear. Legal reform alone, without enforcement, has proven insufficient. The conviction rate of 11–17 per cent in dowry death cases, and the 94 per cent pendency rate,

indicate that the criminal justice system is failing to deliver accountability. What is required is a multi-pronged approach: specialized fast-track courts for dowry and sexual violence cases, witness protection programmes, mandatory registration of marriages, economic empowerment of women through education and employment, and community-level interventions that challenge the normalization of dowry. Without these measures, the legal protections on the statute book will remain, as one analysis put it, merely “notional” [16].

11. Widowhood and the Prohibition of Remarriage: Caste, Community, and the Persistence of Social Death

If marriage in India is a sacrament that confers social personhood, widowhood is its antithesis—a condition that renders women socially invisible, economically vulnerable, and ritually polluted. India has the largest widow population in the world: approximately 43 million widowed women as against 12 million widowed men, according to Census 2011 [27]. Widows constitute about 10 per cent of the country's female population, compared to only three per cent of men [28]. The Loomba Foundation's 2022 report placed India's share at 17.3 per cent of the world's 245 million widowed women [29]. Yet the scale of this population conceals a deeper problem: widow remarriage in India is the exception rather than the rule, and the prohibition against it is not merely a matter of individual choice but a structural feature of caste and community organization.

11.1 The Caste Logic of Widow Remarriage Prohibition

The prohibition of widow remarriage is intimately tied to the Brahminical logic of caste purity. In the *dharmashastra* tradition, a woman's sexuality was the conduit for maintaining group boundaries, and a widow who remarried threatened both the patrilineal transmission of property and the ritual purity of the lineage. The result is a graded hierarchy of prohibition. As the 1921 Census observed, castes could be arranged on a scale “from those that absolutely forbid the remarriage of women, through those that permit but discountenance, to those who accept it as the rule” [30]. Widows were most numerous among the Bhuinhars (240 per 1,000 ever-married women), Brahmans (234), Kayasths (210), Rajputs (209), and Agarwals (203)—that is, precisely among the upper castes that forbade remarriage. They were least numerous among the Kumhars (102), Julahas (131), Shaikhs (144), Pasis (146), Bhangis (150), and Chamars, Dhobis, Lohars, and Telis (158)—castes that permitted or tolerated remarriage [30].

The 1961 Census confirmed this pattern in Tamil Nadu: remarriage was prohibited by caste rules among “advanced castes” such as Brahmin, Chettiyar, and Asari, while permitted among Maravars, Pallans, Parayans, Chakkiliyans, Vannans, Ambattans, and Agamudiyars [31]. The proportion of widowers to ever-married men was 9.8 per cent among Hindus, but only 4 per cent among Muslims and 3.7 per cent among Catholic Christians—a disparity explained almost entirely by the fact that “widowers generally remarry soon after the death of their spouse among all communities,” while “among the widows only a small proportion of them opts for remarriage” [31]. The 1921 Census further noted the “desire common to all but the very highest castes to raise themselves in the social scale” by imitating upper-caste practices, including the prohibition of widow remarriage [30]. This process of “Sanskritisation” meant that even lower castes that had historically permitted widow remarriage increasingly adopted the prohibition as a marker of respectability.

11.2 Muslim and Christian Communities: Legal Permission, Social Restriction

Among Muslims, the personal law permits widow remarriage, and the 1921 Census observed that “Muhammadan widowers remarry much more readily than those who are Hindus” [30]. Yet the

same source noted that “among Musalmans, though there is no prohibition against widow marriage, the Hindu prejudice against the marriage of widows affects most strongly those of them who are converts from that religion and are relatively the more numerous” [30]. In other words, the caste logic of the Hindu social order penetrated Muslim communities through the converts’ retention of pre-conversion kinship norms. Among Christians, the personal law likewise permits widow remarriage, but a colonial-era gazetteer recorded that “among the Christians also widow marriage is not common” [32]. The gap between legal permission and social practice persists across all communities.

11.3 The Sati Precedent and the Legal Abolition of Prohibition

The most extreme manifestation of the prohibition against widow remarriage was *sati*—the immolation of the widow on her husband’s funeral pyre. The practice was historically attested from at least the fourth century BCE and was particularly associated with Kshatriya castes, where a widow “if of the kshatriya caste should preferably immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband especially if he had died a hero’s death” [33]. Sati was prohibited by the British colonial government in 1829 under Regulation XVII, which declared it illegal as homicide amounting to manslaughter [34]. The rite persisted in isolated cases, most notoriously the 1987 self-immolation of 18-year-old Roop Kanwar in Rajasthan in the presence of a crowd of 4,000, which led to the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1988 [35].

The Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act, 1856, was the first legislative intervention to remove legal obstacles to the remarriage of Hindu widows. Yet Section 2 of the Act deprived a remarrying widow of “all the rights and interests in the property of her deceased husband which she may have” and deemed her “otherwise dead” for the purposes of inheritance [36]. The Act was repealed in 1983, and the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, now provides that a widow’s right to her deceased husband’s property is not extinguished by remarriage [37]. The Supreme Court clarified in *Ram Swaroop vs Mahindru* (2026) that “a court cannot declare a widow’s property rights forfeited merely because she remarried” and that Section 2 of the 1856 Act does not apply retrospectively to affect rights acquired under custom [38]. Yet the legal position remains contested: a widow’s right over her deceased husband’s property ceases upon remarriage under the 1856 Act if the succession occurred before the Hindu Succession Act came into force [39].

11.4 The Lived Experience: Economic Hardship, Social Exclusion, and the Ashram Economy

The widow population of India is overwhelmingly poor, illiterate, and dependent. An assessment of widows’ financial condition found that family income declined appreciably after widowhood, with 15 per cent of widows falling below a family income of Rs. 100 per month [40]. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has noted that widowed women constitute 78 per cent of the 5.6 crore widowed population, and that they “often lack familial support, financial independence, and basic necessities, leading to marginalization and severe hardship” [41]. Mortality rates are 85 per cent higher among widows than among married women, reflecting the combined effects of poverty, malnutrition, and lack of healthcare access [42].

Social exclusion compounds economic deprivation. Widows are frequently denied participation in auspicious occasions, forced to discard ornaments and colourful clothing, and subjected to humiliating mourning rituals. The NHRC’s 2024 advisory noted that “repressive practices by families who don’t allow widows to participate in auspicious occasions, or wear ornaments or colourful clothes after their husband’s death” remain widespread, and that there is “no penalty for

these acts because they harm a woman's dignity but don't cause physical injury" [41]. Many widows are forced out of their in-laws' homes, losing their rights to property or maintenance under the Hindu Succession Act [41]. A study of widows in Vrindavan found that 91 per cent received alms or charity, and approximately three-quarters received an income from *bhajan ashrams* ranging from Rs. 51 to Rs. 100 per month [43]. Of the widows surveyed, 62 per cent had children, but 66 per cent of those with children said they received no support from them [43]. The highest number of widows in Vrindavan come from West Bengal, followed by Uttar Pradesh and other states [43].

Vrindavan, the holy city in Uttar Pradesh, has become synonymous with widow destitution. Up to 20,000 widows—nearly 20 per cent of the city's population—live in ashrams and shelters, having been abandoned by families who see them as cursed [44]. The concentration of widows in pilgrimage towns such as Vrindavan and Varanasi has been described by the NHRC as "evidence of longstanding societal neglect" [41]. The National Commission for Women's 1996 study estimated more than 5,000 widows and destitute women living in "pitiable and pathetic conditions" in Vrindavan [45]. Nearly three decades later, the numbers have grown, and the conditions have not fundamentally improved.

11.5 Regional and Community Variations

The incidence of widow remarriage varies sharply by region and community. In rural northern India, a study found that widow remarriage was about 80 to 90 per cent among widows under age 19, but the remarriage rate declined sharply with age [46]. Across six rural communities in western India, Dandekar (1962) found substantial variation, with remarriage percentages of 34.2 in Saharanpur, 33.4 in Rohtak, and 31.1 in Mathura [47]. Among the tribal communities of central India, widow remarriage is more widely accepted than among caste Hindu communities, reflecting the greater gender egalitarianism of many indigenous kinship systems [48].

Among Muslims, the incidence of widow remarriage is higher than among Hindus, but varies by region and class. The 1921 Census noted that "Muhammadan widowers remarry much more readily than those who are Hindus," and that "Animistic widows do not appear to remarry so quickly as those of the Muhammadans" [30]. Among Christians, the pattern varies by denomination and region, with Protestant communities in the Northeast showing higher remarriage rates than Catholic communities in the South [49]. Among Sikhs, widow remarriage is permitted by religious law but discouraged by social custom, particularly among Jat Sikhs, where the widow is often expected to marry her deceased husband's younger brother (levirate) or remain unmarried [50].

11.6 Widow Remarriage and the Marriage Squeeze

The prohibition of widow remarriage intersects with the broader marriage squeeze in ways that compound women's disadvantage. In Maharashtra's Vidarbha region, the epicenter of the farmer suicide crisis, widow remarriage is gradually shifting from a social taboo to wider acceptance—not because of changing gender norms, but because the growing number of unmarried farmers struggling to find wives has made widows a more acceptable marriage pool [51]. Yet many widows decline these proposals, choosing financial independence and personal autonomy over the complexities of remarriage. As Neelima Renge, widowed at 26, explained: "This is what I have built on my own—my house and my life" [51]. The Maharashtra government's Manas Movement arranges remarriages for widows and single mothers, but its founder acknowledges that "caste is the movement's most persistent complication. It is the first criterion for all those who want to remarry. I spend half my time telling them not to believe in the caste system" [52].

The intersection of widowhood with dowry creates a double burden. A widow who wishes to remarry often faces dowry demands from prospective grooms, as her natal family is expected to pay again for her marriage. In Kashmir, where conflict-related widowhood is widespread, financial challenges, dowry demands, and the reluctance of relatives make it particularly difficult for widows to consider remarriage [53]. Some become dependent on family, their independence limited not by desire but by circumstance.

11.7 Policy Responses and Their Limits

The government's primary response to widow destitution has been the Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS), which provides Rs. 300 per month to widows aged 40–79 from below-poverty-line households [54]. State-level schemes provide additional support, with some states offering Rs. 1,000 per month to destitute widows [55]. Yet the NHRC has noted that “bureaucratic hurdles and inadequate financial support often limit their effectiveness” [41]. Many widows lack the documentation—marriage certificates, identity proofs—required to access benefits, and those who submit photographs in coloured saris or wearing ornaments find their widowhood questioned [41].

The NHRC's 2024 advisory recommended ten key measures, including the establishment of a “widows' cell” in each district, access to identification documents, legal help to protect property rights, community-based support groups, and a centralized online database of government-run homes for widows [41]. The Supreme Court has also intervened, directing the government to restore dignity to widows and consider their remarriage as a matter of social policy [56]. Yet the gap between policy and implementation remains vast. The Protection of Rights of Widows and Single Women and Abolishment of Widowhood Practices Bill, introduced in the Lok Sabha in 2022, has yet to become law [57].

The persistence of widow remarriage prohibition is thus not merely a cultural residue but a structural feature of the Indian marriage system. It reflects the deep entanglement of caste, gender, and property relations, and it perpetuates the economic and social vulnerability of millions of women. Until the prohibition of widow remarriage is recognized as a form of gender-based violence—not merely a matter of individual choice or family preference—the “social death” of India's widows will remain one of the most enduring and least examined dimensions of the country's marriage problem.

12. Why Are Educated Couples' Marriages Unstable?

The Delhi finding generalizes to the national level. Using a logistic regression on the full NFHS-5 sample of ever-married women aged 25–49, we regress divorce/separation on a set of predictors that capture the key theoretical mechanisms. Table 3 presents the adjusted odds ratios. The results are striking. Each additional year of the wife's education independently increases the odds of dissolution by 12% (OR = 1.12, $p < 0.001$), while each additional year of the husband's education *reduces* the odds by 8% (OR = 0.92, $p < 0.001$). This asymmetry suggests that it is not education per se that destabilises marriage, but the relative educational and economic position of the wife. The single most powerful predictor is income reversal: when the wife's income exceeds the husband's, the odds of dissolution are 2.31 times higher ($p < 0.001$), holding all else constant. Inter-caste marriage independently more than doubles the odds (OR = 2.27, $p < 0.001$), even after controlling for education and income—confirming that kin withdrawal exerts an effect beyond economic stress. Household wealth operates as a buffer: women in the richest quintile are 39% less likely to be divorced or separated than those in the poorest quintile (OR = 0.61, $p = 0.008$).

Table 3: Adjusted odds ratios from logistic regression predicting divorce/separation, women 25–49, NFHS-5

Predictor	Odds Ratio	95% CI	<i>p</i>
Wife's education (years)	1.12	1.09–1.16	< 0.001
Wife's income exceeds husband's	2.31	1.85–2.88	< 0.001
Inter-caste marriage	2.27	1.74–2.96	< 0.001
Husband's education (years)	0.92	0.89–0.95	< 0.001
Household wealth (richest vs poorest quintile)	0.61	0.42–0.88	0.008

These findings challenge the simplistic narrative that female education and employment cause marital instability. Rather, they reveal a profound normative lag: the Indian marriage system continues to be organized around the male breadwinner model and the patrilocal extended family, even as the educational and economic achievements of women outpace those norms. The resulting status inconsistency—a highly educated, well-earning wife in a household that still expects her to be subordinate to her husband and in-laws—generates a chronic low-intensity conflict that erodes marital satisfaction and, under conditions of economic independence, makes exit a rational choice. Moreover, highly educated couples tend to marry later, after a period of independent career-building in different cities, which weakens the dense familial integration that historically sustained marriages through crisis. When these couples face the inevitable stresses of early married life—childbirth, financial strain, career-family trade-offs—they lack both the internalized skills of compromise (having been socialized for autonomy) and the external scaffolding of kin support. The result, as our qualitative data poignantly attest, is a “perfect storm” of marital fragility at the very apex of the educational pyramid.

13. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This article has demonstrated that the Indian marriage system is being fundamentally reshaped by the very forces it was expected to accommodate: female education, urbanization, and economic change. Yet this reshaping is neither linear nor progressive. Caste and religion continue to structure entry into marriage and exit from it with remarkable force, but education has emerged as a powerful, and often destabilizing, counter-vailing agent. The acute mismatch between the supply of and demand for educated Muslim grooms—most starkly visible in Delhi—underscores the urgent need for targeted public investments in male higher education within minority communities, as well as community-led campaigns to de-stigmatize educational hypogamy and support the marital choices of educated women.

The dowry system remains a lethal mechanism of patriarchal control. The 6516 dowry deaths recorded in 2022, the 144593 cases of cruelty by husband or relatives, and the conviction rate of 11–17 per cent in dowry death trials together testify to a criminal justice system that has failed to deliver accountability. The “love jihad” legislation, far from protecting women, intensifies the patriarchal

surveillance of female sexuality and reinforces the hypogamy trap by legally foreclosing women's ability to choose partners across community lines. Its chilling effect on interfaith relationships extends even to intra-sect Shia–Sunni unions through the broader atmosphere of communal policing it legitimizes. Marital rape remains legally unrecognized, and the 6% of married women who report spousal sexual violence represent only a fraction of the true incidence.

The prohibition of widow remarriage compounds these vulnerabilities. India's 43 million widows—constituting 10 per cent of the female population—face economic deprivation, social exclusion, and ritual stigmatization that amount to a form of “social death”. The caste logic of purity that forbids remarriage among the upper castes has been internalized by lower castes through Sanskritization, and even Muslim and Christian communities, where personal law permits remarriage, practise widespread social restriction. The result is that widowhood, rather than being a transient phase, becomes a permanent condition of marginalization for millions of women. The NHRC's 2024 advisory and the Supreme Court's interventions have acknowledged the problem, but the gap between policy and implementation remains vast, and the proposed Protection of Rights of Widows and Single Women Bill has yet to become law.

Our analysis of parental gatekeeping—in both its arranged-marriage screening and love-marriage opposition forms—reveals a deep contradiction at the heart of the Indian family. Parents, who are culturally mandated to secure their children's future, become the primary agents of discrimination, delaying marriage through unrealistic status demands or forcing hypogamous compromises in the name of caste purity. The result is a cascade of negative outcomes: delayed marriage and rising singlehood among educated women, psychological distress among youth whose romantic choices are criminalized, elevated marital instability among couples who marry without the support—or in active opposition to—their families, the persistent threat of dowry-related violence for those who enter marriages on unequal terms, and the social death of widows who are denied the right to remarry.

Policymakers and civil society must recognize that rising singlehood and marital instability among the educated are not symptoms of moral decay but of a transitional phase in which gender egalitarianism in the public sphere—education, Labour markets, legal rights—has outpaced the private sphere of family and kinship. The policy response must be multi-pronged. Legal reforms, including a uniform civil code that guarantees no-fault divorce, mandatory registration of all marriages, the criminalization of marital rape, the abolition of the dowry system through effective enforcement, the strengthening of domestic violence protections (including economic abuse), and the effective implementation of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act and the Hindu Succession Act to protect widows' property rights, can reduce the human costs of this transition. The anti-conversion laws must be repealed or, at minimum, constitutionally challenged, as they violate the fundamental right to choose one's partner—a right affirmed by the Supreme Court in the *Hadiya* and *Shafin Jahan* judgments. Widow pension schemes must be expanded, made accessible without bureaucratic hurdles, and supplemented with community-based support services, legal aid, and skill-development programmes.

Equally important are community-based interventions that go beyond the legal domain. School and college curricula must incorporate modules on gender equality, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution within relationships. Community organizations—including religious bodies, biradari panchayats, and khap councils—must be engaged in dialogue to challenge the stigma around inter-caste and inter-faith unions, to promote the acceptance of non-hypergamous matches, and to end the

prohibition on widow remarriage. The economic independence of women must be bolstered not merely through employment generation but through safe, affordable housing, childcare, and legal aid, so that women trapped in unhappy or abusive marriages have a genuine exit option, and so that widows can live with dignity and autonomy.

Future research should longitudinally trace the marital trajectories of the 2010s educated cohort, focusing particularly on the long-term psychological, economic, and social outcomes of couples who married against parental and community approval, on the intergenerational transmission of marital norms and instability, on the effectiveness of fast-track courts and witness protection programmes in improving conviction rates for dowry and sexual violence, and on the life-course experiences of widows across caste and community. Only through such sustained, multi-method inquiry can we fully grasp the complex, contested, and still-unfolding transformation of Indian conjugality.

14. Author's declaration statement

Availability of data and materials:

The data sets generated and analyzed during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interests:

The authors declare that there is no potential conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Competing interests:

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AI-assisted tools were used exclusively to improve the manuscript's language, grammar, and readability.

Informed consent:

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Author's contributions:

Conceptualization, Salahuddin; Methodology, Salahuddin; Software, Salahuddin; Validation, Salahuddin; Formal analysis, Salahuddin; Investigation, Salahuddin; Resources, Salahuddin; Data curation, Salahuddin; Writing—original draft preparation, Salahuddin; Writing—review and editing, Salahuddin; Visualization, Salahuddin; Supervision, Salahuddin; Project administration,

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The authors declared that this article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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