

# Interreligious Marriage and the Bonds of Caste: The Case of the Nadars in South India

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Traditionally, most marriages in India are arranged marriages, in which parents find a suitable spouse for their child from among those belonging to the same caste and following the same religion. In the case of arranged marriages, the opinions of parents and relatives usually take precedence over the wills of the potential marriage partners; therefore, arranged marriages between people from different religions are rare. Nevertheless, some couples do undergo interreligious marriages. Such marriages are far outside traditional values and are not welcomed by not only parents but also other relatives, so they are very rare.

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the characteristics of marriages within the Nadar caste group in Tamil Nadu, South India. Unlike other caste groups, the Nadars have no resistance to interreligious marriages. This paper clarifies the background of the establishment of interreligious marriages among this group and analyzes them to clarify how caste and religion are related to marriage in India. Specifically, I will examine interreligious marriages performed among the Catholics of Nadars. I collected information on this caste during my research (between 1999 and 2000) conducted in M Parish of Kottar Diocese, Catholic, which is located in Kanya Kumari District, Tamil Nadu.

Key Words : Marriage, Caste, Nadars, Interreligious

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## I. Introduction

Traditionally, most marriages in India are arranged marriages, in which parents find a suitable spouse for their child from among those belonging to the same caste and following the same religion. In the case of arranged marriages, the opinions of parents and relatives usually take precedence over the wills of the potential marriage partners; therefore, arranged marriages between people of different religions are rare. Nevertheless, some couples do undergo interreligious marriages. Such marriages are far outside traditional values and are not welcomed by not only parents but also other relatives, so they are very rare.

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## II. India's Marriage Situation, and Interreligious Marriage as a Minority

In India, Civil Marriage Law (modern Western European law), non-Western European religious law, and customary law coexist. Laws concerning marriage differ according to the religions to which the potential partners belong. In 1954,

under the Special Marriage Act regarding civil marriage, men and women belonging to different religious groups were allowed to marry without conversion. In India, interreligious marriage is recognized under the Civil Marriage Law, but there are very few cases of interreligious marriage (Ministry of Justice Immigration Bureau 2018; Hirata 2007: 103–104).

There are few interreligious marriages in India because marriage is usually based on marrying a partner from the same caste. Traditional and proper marriages are conducted between individuals from the same caste and a follower of the same religion, with the consent of both sets of relatives. Furthermore, marriage is primarily thought to build a relationship between families, and the wills of family members and relatives take precedence over the will of an individual in choosing a spouse.

Marriage between people from different castes is seen as shameful for their caste groups. Their behavior is regarded as deviating from social norms, and such a couple will be expelled from the caste. Moreover, they are disowned by their relatives. In India, where the social welfare systems are not well developed, newlywed couples face great difficulties when their relatives cut off their support. Prejudice and discrimination against interreligious couples are rare in urban areas, but they remain strong in rural areas (Tsuruta 2019: 158–161).

Although many Indians have left their home nations and have settled in other countries immigrants, a strong sense of rejection toward interreligious marriage is found even among those who have left their home countries for along time. First-generation immigrants tend to retain the traditional Indian values of their home countries, even among those in developed countries.

In my research, I found one example of first-generation immigrants in Singapore who wanted their children to marry a person from the same caste, according to Indian tradition. There was a couple from Tamil Nadu who got married in the 1950s. The husband acquired Singaporean citizenship, and the wife acquired permanent residency in Singapore. They settled there after their marriage. The couple had three children who were all Singapore citizens (the eldest son, second son, and the daughter).

First-generation immigrant couples believe that their children will follow traditional Indian values by marrying people from the same caste, as they did. However, when this couple's eldest son, who had studied in the United States, wanted to marry a Chinese American, they strongly objected to it. They did not even attend their eldest son's wedding, which was held in the United States, and

they kept their distance from the couple until their grandchildren were born.

The first-generation couple was not satisfied with their eldest son's marriage, so they began searching for suitable partners for their second son and daughter from the same caste through networks that would assist them in following traditional Indian values. Eventually, the second son and daughter married individuals from the same caste, and their wedding ceremonies were held in India in a traditional manner (Okamitsu 2022: 05).

Most interreligious marriages, with some exceptions, are love matches. In these cases, unless the couple is blessed with the approval of their relatives, they follow Civil Marriage Law based on Western modern law, rather than non-Western religious or customary law. This is because such marriages are not celebrated by parents and relatives and are carried out according to the couple's will.

Even interreligious marriages supported by understanding relatives face many challenges. This is because different castes and religions create various differences in daily life, and conflicts of opinion between husbands and wives often lead to unsuccessful marriages. In fact, interreligious couples differ in a variety of ways, from religious eating habits to daily lifestyle customs. Usually, interreligious couples are not only expelled from their castes but also they are also estranged from their relatives. Therefore, in the face of trouble, they cannot expect help from their relatives.

Marriage in India has a special importance to social life, as it functions to unite caste members and consolidate relationships between in-laws. Regardless of age, unmarried people are not regarded as fully fledged, and only married people are accepted as full members of society. Therefore, parents consider it their duty to see that their children get married. When their children reach an appropriate age, they start looking for spouses for their children through relatives and social networks. It is considered a disgrace to the family to have an unmarried daughter after she reaches a suitable age. Marriage is more than just a personal matter; it is a family concern. Moreover, it is the most important task in life for both men and women. This trend is seen not only in conservative rural areas but also in urban areas.

Next, I discuss the percentages of men and women who are able to marry, and have and raise children. India's population is the second largest in the world, at 1.36141 billion people (2019 World Bank data). India's population structure is mostly young, and the aged population is rapidly decreasing, thus forming a pyramid shape (Figure 1). The Special Marriage Act allows marriage for men aged 21 and over and women aged 18 and over within Indian territories (Ito 2017: 90).



Source: Retrieved from the International Investment Bank (n.d.) *Investment Climate in India*

Figure 1 Indian Demographics (2018)

Men over the age of 21 and women over the age of 18, who can legally marry and are under the age of 49, make up more than half of the total population. According to Figure 1, men and women who belong to the age group of between 20 and 49 years of age make up the majority of the Indian population. This means there are many people who can marry and raise children.

Next, I will consider the population by religion in India and discuss the reasons why the probability of interreligious marriage is low. According to the Census of India 2011, the proportion of each religion is as follows: Hinduism, 79.8%; Islam, 14.2%; Christianity, 2.3%; Sikhism, 1.7%; Buddhism, 0.7%; and Jainism, 0.4%. This means that the majority of marriages in India are arranged between people of the same caste and religion. Since Hindus make up the absolute majority of the population, and many marriages are between people of the same caste and religion, this means marriages between Hindus make up the majority of all Indian marriages. Thus, the probability of interreligious marriage will be low.

### III. Overview of the Nadar Caste and Their Caste Identity

In this chapter, I will discuss the features of Nadars and why they maintain a strong caste identity, irrespective of religious differences. The Nadar caste is a Tamil-speaking group living mainly in the southern half of Tamil Nadu [Kooiman 1983: 118119; Nagam Aiya(I) 1989: 398]. Almost 90% of the people in this caste are Hindus, with about 10% being Christians, along with a few Muslims.

There are many Hindu Nadars in the central and southern parts of Tamil Nadu, around Madurai, and many Christian Nadars in the Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli

Districts in the southernmost part of the peninsula (Templeman 1997: 2729).

The Nadars were once called ‘Shanar’<sup>4)</sup> and were known as one of the lower castes who made a living as toddy tappers. The 1891 census gave the Nadar caste an intermediate position between the Sudras and the untouchables (Government of India 1892; Thurston 1975: 369).

Some of the Nadars converted to Catholicism and Protestantism. These are known as the Christian Nadars. However, there were differences in the social and economic situations of the Catholic and Protestant Nadars. Below is a description of the Nadars’ conversion to Christianity.

First, I will discuss the Catholic Nadars. In 1690, Jesuit Peter Marat converted the Nadars to Catholicism, and this was said to be the first conversion of the Nadars to Catholicism. (Hardgrave 1969: 29 – 41; Kooiman 1983: 118 – 119; Thekkedath 1988: 194). Initially, Catholic Nadars were a minority among the Christian Nadars, but their numbers began to increase in the second half of the 20th century.

The missionary policy of the Catholic Church prioritized faith guidance for converts and did not emphasize education as a means of improving their social conditions. As such, Catholic Nadars did not particularly benefit from their conversion. Even today, they have limited access to higher education; as a result, they lack the opportunity to pursue professional careers that require higher education. Therefore, many of them are engaged in professions with unstable incomes, such as smallholder farmers, carpenters, and plasterers. Nevertheless, as more people work in the Middle East as laborers, their economic conditions have gradually improved, and the rate of higher education among their children has increased.

Next, I will discuss the Protestant Nadars. The conversion of Nadars to Protestantism began at the beginning of the nineteenth century. At that time, the Nadar caste had a strong population presence in the southern part of the Kingdom of Travancore, which covered most of the south of modern-day Kerala. The main Protestant missions were The London Missionary Society (LMS) and The Society for Propagation of the Gospel (SPG). These Protestant missionary organizations disavowed the caste system, preached equality before God, and provided medical and educational opportunities to their converts. The Protestant Church tried to help people understand the doctrine of Christianity before they converted. The Nadars were positioned at the bottom in the socio-economic rank of Hindu society, and they felt they had no way out of their desperate situation. Therefore, they chose Christianity to give them equality before God. After finding salvation, they

converted to Protestantism on a community-by-community basis.

The Protestant Nadars, in contrast to the Catholic Nadars, gained the strong backing from a missionary after conversion and rose in both social and economic status. The missionary brought various benefits to the Protestant Nadars. For example, Protestant Nadars had the opportunity to receive higher education at educational institutions run by missionaries. The Protestant Nadars who received higher and more professional education were more engaged in professional jobs. As more and more people entered the professional world, not only their economic status, but also their social status, improved. The improved social and economic conditions of the Protestant Nadars played an important role of Nadar caste uplift movement in the 19th century.

The Nadars are a unique caste group that were made up of not only Hindus, but they accepted those who converted to Christianity as their brethren. People who converted to Christianity were usually regarded as a different caste group from the original Hindu caste members, and contact between the two groups was limited. However, unlike other caste groups, the Nadars share a strong caste identity, maintaining kinship relations between different religious groups. The following describes how the Nadars maintained a strong caste identity, regardless of their religious differences.

In the 19th century, under British rule, a census was introduced in India, and each caste was ranked with the Brahmin at the top. People in India became interested in the ranking of their particular caste. The Nadars used to rank at the bottom of the Hindu caste system, roughly on par with the Untouchables, but they desired a higher position in the census rankings.

Since the Nadars were not satisfied with their low caste rankings, they began to transcend religious barriers and began an uplift movement to seek a higher status, which included changing their caste name. Protestant Nadars played a major role in the uplift movement. At that time, the group of Protestant Nadars was highly educated, specialized in their professions, and they rose significantly in terms of their economic status and social prestige. Hindu Nadars, who wanted to break away from the low-caste group, actively married into Protestant groups, and they strengthened their unity as a caste group beyond religious differences. Using the fame of the Protestant Nadars, they collectively achieved caste uplift. Because of this, the Nadars strengthened their caste identity to transcend religious boundaries (Hardgrave 1969).

#### IV. Marriage as Sacrament in the Catholic Church and Marriage Customs in Kottar Diocese, Tamil Nadu

This section describes the Catholic Church's marriage regulations and the marriage customs followed by Catholics in K Diocese, Tamil Nadu, where I conducted field work.

First, let me state the provisions of the Catholic Church concerning marriage. The Catholic Church considers marriage to be a sacrament ordained by Jesus, marked by unity (monogamy) and an indissoluble contract premised on mutual consent. The sacraments in the Catholic Church are the most important official religious rituals, also known as the Liturgy. For a Catholic marriage to be sacramental, it must take place in a "wedding Mass" inside a church.

However, marriage is sacramental only if both the bride and groom are Catholic. If only one person is Catholic, the wedding can be held in the church with special permission, but it is not to be considered a sacrament. All Catholic weddings, whether sacramental or not, require prior guidance from a parish priest.

Next, I will describe the rules and customs concerning marriage among Catholics in the Kottar Diocese. In the Kottar Diocese, marriage is considered a sacrament, and strict rules have been established. Only those who follow the rules are allowed to marry in the Catholic Church. This is a well-known fact and is well understood by local Catholics. The fact that only those who follow the instructions of the Church can marry in the Catholic Church is known to local Catholics from an early age, since it is learned during catechism education. If Catholics in this area do not marry in a church, there is always something missing.

Those who wish to marry in the Catholic Church of the Diocese Kottar must go through the prescribed procedures determined by the diocese at the parish church to which they belong. The procedures required by the Church are carried out regardless of the believer's caste, economic status, or family environment. The following is the procedure before marriage: (1) confirmation of age and the church tax payment, (2) participation in a marriage preparation course, (3) the exchange of the pre-marriage procedure documents, (4) notification of the marriage, and (5) the exchange of marriage inquiries.

(1) Confirmation of age and the church tax payment refers to whether the potential marriage partners have reached the legal age for marriage based on the parish's baptismal register book. Men need to be 21 years of age and above, while



women need to be at least 18 years old. At the same time, whether a tax needs to be paid to the church, commonly known as the church tax, should be confirmed. If the couple does not pay the full amount of the church tax, they are not allowed to get married at the church until the delinquent tax is paid.

(2) Participation in a marriage preparation course means that after confirming that all taxes have been paid, men and women who are planning to get married need to learn about the significance of marriage and their responsibilities as husbands, wives, and parents. The marriage preparation course covers the concept, as well as the sacramental duties, of marriage. It also covers their parental responsibilities, canonical forms, validity of marriage, the non-dissolution of marriage, different forms of marriage, and sex education (P.S. David 2002: 1–2).

(3) The exchange of the pre-marriage procedure documents means that after the potential spouses' ages and tax payments are confirmed by the parish, a letter called the procedure pre-marriage is exchanged between the two parishes to which the prospective marriage partners belong. In the document, the parish priest confirms the officiant of the engagement agreement, the date of the planned marriage, and the officiant of the wedding Mass. Personal information, such as the names and dates of birth of the groom/bride and details about the wedding ceremony, are listed for the proposed marriage.

(4) Notification of the marriage means that after the pre-marriage procedure documents have been exchanged, the prospective marriage is announced in the parish church to which the prospective spouses belong at Sunday Mass for three consecutive weeks. The wedding notice is given on the same day at the church to which the bridegroom/bride-to-be belongs. The marriage announcements are made to inform the priest of any possible impediments to the proposed marriage. Church weddings are not permitted if marital impediments are recognized. Marital impediments are rarely reported in the region, as most marriages are arranged.

(5) The exchange of marriage inquiries is a six-page booklet that certifies that the prospective spouse has met all the conditions required for marriage at the church. The contents are divided into two halves. The first consists of questionnaires to be answered by individual applicants: the parish to which the groom/bride belongs, personal information about the marriage applicant, the provisions for marriage under the canon law, marriage according to Christianity, and marriage as a sacrament. The second half is filled in by the priest because it shows that the priest has the church's permission to conduct the wedding. It consists of the *Nihil obstat*/no objection, special mandate, and the marriage

inquiry.

To have a wedding at a Catholic church in the Kottar Diocese, everyone should follow the above procedure. Only after it is confirmed that there are no obstacles to the marriage between the prospective bridegroom/bride, permission is granted for the wedding to take place at the church.

## V. Cases of interreligious marriage in the Kottar Diocese

In this chapter, I will discuss information about the cases of interreligious marriages collected in M Parish of the Kottar Diocese, where my field work was conducted. M Parish is a small parish with a Catholic population of 2,480 out of a total population of 6,930 in 1983, which was the most recent survey conducted at the time of this research.

Catholics in the Kottar Diocese received religious education at both home and church from an early age, and their Catholic identities are strong. Catholic marriages among the Nadars in M Parish are mostly between two Catholics, but information about four cases of interreligious marriage has been collected. Details about these cases are as follows.

All four cases of interreligious marriages were arranged between Catholic

Table 1 Cases of interreligious marriage in M Parish

Place	M Parish	M Parish	M Parish	M Parish
Case number	A	B	C	D
Form of Marriage	Arranged	Arranged	Arranged	Arranged
Husband's Caste	Nadar	Nadar	Nadar	Nadar
Wife's Caste	Nadar	Nadar	Nadar	Nadar
Husband's Pre-Marriage Religion	H	C	C	C
Wife's Pre-Marriage Religion	C	H	H	H
Husband's Post-Marriage Religion	C	C	C	C
Wife's Post-Marriage Religion	C	C	C	C
Children's Religion	C	C	C	C

Source: Produced by Nobuko Okamitsu

\*C is an abbreviation for Catholic.

\*H is an abbreviation for Hindu.

Nadars and Hindu Nadars. Generally, an arranged marriage is between people of the same caste and religion. However, in the case of the Nadars, a match is arranged even between two people who differ religiously. In other words, the first requirement for a Nadar marriage partner is to belong to the same caste. This is because they consider attributes other than caste to be secondary.

Interreligious marriages are usually seen in love matches among upper-middle class people in urban areas, but interreligious marriages between the Nadars occur in both urban and rural areas. Generally, rural areas are more conservative than urban areas and are therefore expected to be more socially traditional. Marriages in rural areas are more often arranged by parents in a traditional way; that is, arrangements are made between people of the same caste and the same religion, so they don't bother any difficulties as seen in interreligious marriage. However, in the case of the Nadars, interreligious couples do not suffer the social disadvantage of being excluded from caste groups as seen in interreligious marriage. The traditional principles of marriage in India do not apply to interreligious marriages among the Nadars.

Furthermore, interreligious marriages are arranged among the Nadars because Christian Nadars are in the minority, representing only 10% of the total population. Adding the majority Hindus to the pool of marriage candidates will increase the number of human resources available. This increases the likelihood of finding a suitable marriage partner from among a greater number of candidates. The Nadars as a caste group have a strong identity, so interreligious marriages are accepted.

Next, let me take a look at four specific examples of interreligious marriages among the Nadars – three cases of marriage between a Hindu woman and a Catholic man (Cases B, C, and D), and one case of marriage between a Hindu man and a Catholic woman (Case A). In four cases of interreligious marriage, both male and female Hindus converted to Catholicism.

Special marriage law allows pagans to marry without conversion. Nonetheless, in four cases of interreligious marriages among the Nadars, Hindus converted to Catholicism before marrying. This is because the Catholic Church has rules and regulations regarding marriage for Catholics. A wedding cannot be held in a church unless both the bride and groom are Catholic.

The most important matter regarding the Catholic Church's rules and regulations for marriage is that it should be conducted as a sacrament. For Catholics, marriage at a church under canon law is the only marriage that can be considered legal. For a marriage to be acceptable by church standards, both the

bride and groom must be Catholics. Catholics learn about the catechism at Sunday School from an early age, and it is common knowledge that the marriage should be conducted at the church. Therefore, if a non-Catholic is a candidate for a marriage partner, that person should convert to Catholicism.

Three (Cases B, C, and D) out of the four cases of interreligious marriages among the Nadars were cases in which Hindu women converted to Catholicism, which was the religion of the husband. India is a male-dominated society, so there is a strong belief that a wife should obey her husband after they are married. However, Nadar women who become Catholics are not compelled to follow the Catholic faith. In some cases, converted wives maintain their Hindu practices, such as celebrating Hindu festivals. A person who converts to Catholicism upon marriage can celebrate Hindu festivals with the understanding and agreement of the family into which they have married. The most important thing among the Nadars is caste identity, so religious conversion may be seen as merely a condition for establishing a successful marriage, not as a true change in personal beliefs.

In the case of the Nadars, it is not taboo for a Hindu to convert to Catholicism to marry a Catholic, but it is rare for a Catholic woman to marry a Hindu man and live according to Hinduism. This is because in Catholic families, children go to church and attend Mass at least every Sunday. Moreover, they receive catechism from an early age, so they have a strong Catholic identity. In particular, women tend to be more religious, and those who abandon their Catholic faith by marrying a Hindu feel like they are leaving something important behind. For this reason, this situation is very rare.

On the other hand, as seen in Case A, a Catholic woman who married a man who has converted from Hinduism to Catholicism. The husband's family remains Hindu, but they allow their son to convert from Hinduism to Catholicism to marry a Catholic, which is less of a problem for them. The reason why men do not bother to convert to Catholicism for marriage is that, unlike women, men tend not to worry much about religion.

All four interreligious couples had children who followed Catholicism. This is because the Catholic community retains a strong identity as a Christian. It is natural for a Catholic couple to want their children to be Catholic, as well.

## VI. Summary

A special marriage law enacted in 1954 allowed interreligious marriages without

conversion. However, all the cases of interreligious marriages among the Nadars in M Parish discussed here were conducted in Catholic churches as a sacrament after Hindus converted to Catholicism. This occurred because of the speciality of the Catholic population in that region.

Catholics in this region received catechism from an early age and accepted Catholic marriage as a sacrament of the Catholic Church. Therefore, even interreligious marriages that were arranged between Catholics and Hindus were performed sacramentally in the Catholic Church after the Hindus converted to Catholicism. However, whether the conversion to Catholicism led to a sustained religious life as a Catholic was an individual matter.

Four cases of interreligious marriages among the Nadars discussed here were arranged marriages. Generally, a group that converts from Hinduism to Christianity is regarded as separate and independent of the original caste group. Moreover, there is no interaction between the two groups. However, in the case of the Nadars, the original Hindu group and the group who converted to Christianity both retain their caste identity as Nadars, and kinship is maintained between the two groups. The Nadars maintained a strong caste identity because the group that converted to Protestantism played a major role in the caste uplift movement of the 19th century.

There are a few reasons why interreligious marriages among the Nadars take the form of arranged marriages. First, it can be pointed out that the Nadars maintain a strong caste identity within two different groups: the Hindus and the Christians. Another reason for interreligious marriages among these two groups is that Christian Nadars are a minority (10 %). In other words, there are more options for Christian groups as minorities to find suitable marriage partners from among, the Hindu majority.

It is common for the Nadars to conduct interreligious marriages within their same caste, which is rare in India. Moreover, couples who participate in interreligious marriages are not disadvantaged in these communities because of their strong caste identities as the Nadars, regardless of religion. In this way, the Nadars are quite a unique group. Their uniqueness as a caste group allows for interreligious marriages among them without any difficulties or problems.

#### Notes

- 1) The first Indian census was held in 1872, and it is currently completed every 10 years.
- 2) According to 1983 parish statistics, which was the latest one when I researched there, M Parish's total population was 6,930, with 1,525 Catholics in the main station, 482 in the T Substation, and 473 in the G Substation. Catholics make up about 36% of the population.

- 3) The Kottar Diocese was divided into two in 2014. One was labeled the Kottar Diocese, the other was labeled the Kuzhithurai Diocese. M Parish is presently located in the Kuzhithurai Diocese.
- 4) It is generally believed that the name 'Shanar' derives from the word 'palm wine', which is associated with the caste's traditional occupation.

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