

Literature Review

The Role of Caste and Sect System in Marriage Decisions in Punjab: A Case Study of Chakwal

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of caste and sect systems in marriage decision-making in Chakwal, a district in the Punjab province of Pakistan. In South Asian societies, marital alliances are deeply influenced by historical, cultural, and religious values, with caste and sect identities playing pivotal roles in determining suitable matches. Despite modernization and increased educational attainment, traditional norms remain deeply embedded in rural districts like Chakwal. This research aims to understand the extent to which caste and sect systems continue to influence partner selection, and how these preferences interact with socioeconomic factors such as education, income, and occupation.

The research employs a quantitative methodology, using a structured Likert scale-based questionnaire to collect data from a purposive sample of 300 respondents (both males and females, aged 18–60). The survey includes variables such as caste significance, sect compatibility, parental involvement, and acceptance of inter-caste or inter-sect marriages. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression modeling.

Findings reveal that caste remains a central criterion in marriage decision-making, with over 75% of respondents considering caste compatibility either important or very important. Sect identity also plays a significant but slightly lesser role, particularly among more religious families. Regression results show that caste has a statistically significant effect on marriage choices, even after controlling for education and income. The study concludes with policy and educational recommendations to foster more inclusive social attitudes and encourage cross-boundary marriages. It provides a nuanced understanding of how tradition and modernity intersect in marriage decisions in rural Pakistan.

Introduction

Marriage is a fundamental social institution that reflects a society's values, norms, and hierarchical structures. In South Asia, particularly in Pakistan, marriage is not merely a private or personal contract between two individuals but a deeply embedded socio-cultural phenomenon, often shaped by community standards, family honor, and religious ideologies. Among the various social factors influencing marital decisions in Pakistan, caste and sect systems remain highly prominent, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas like Chakwal, a district located in northern Punjab.

The caste system, although not part of Islamic teachings, has deeply permeated Muslim society in South Asia due to centuries of cultural syncretism with pre-Islamic traditions.

Likewise, sectarian divisions—mainly between Sunni and Shia communities, as well as within Sunni denominations such as Barelvi, Deobandi, and Ahl-e-Hadith—also play a critical role in shaping social identities and group boundaries. Both caste and sect influence the pool of “acceptable” marriage partners and are used as mechanisms to preserve cultural purity, religious values, and socio-economic stratification.

Contextualizing Chakwal: A culturally conservative district

Chakwal, located in northern Punjab, offers a relevant case for examining caste and sect dynamics. Despite relatively higher literacy rates and urban exposure compared to southern Punjab, Chakwal remains rooted in tribal affiliations and biradari (clan) politics. Major castes in the region include

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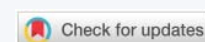
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Awan, Rajput, Jatt, Syed, and Gujjar, among others, and inter-caste marriages are often socially discouraged or outright rejected. Similarly, sectarian affiliations, although less rigid, play an important role, especially in conservative or religious families who prefer spouses from the same doctrinal background.

Social reputation, honor (izzat), family lineage, and religious purity are central to the logic of these decisions. Marriage, in such contexts, becomes a tool not just for the union of individuals but for the reproduction of social structures and boundaries.

Theoretical background

This research is informed by structural-functionalism, which views institutions like marriage as central to the functioning and reproduction of society. The caste and sect systems can be understood as tools for maintaining social order and identity. However, from a conflict theory perspective, these systems also serve to reinforce inequality and limit individual freedom. This dual perspective allows the research to explore the tension between traditional structures and modernizing influences, such as education, urban migration, and digital exposure, that are beginning to challenge longstanding norms.

The intersectionality framework also plays a role in understanding how multiple social factors—caste, sect, gender, education, income—interact to shape marriage decisions in complex ways.

Problem statement

While many studies have focused on the broader aspects of marriage customs in South Asia, limited empirical research exists specifically on how caste and sect operate in present-day marriage decision-making in districts like Chakwal. With societal modernization, there is a growing perception that caste and sect are declining in importance; however, anecdotal evidence suggests otherwise. This study seeks to bridge this gap through a quantitative, data-driven approach that assesses the real influence of these social markers.

Significance of the study

This research is significant for multiple reasons:

1. **Academic contribution:** It adds to the existing body of literature on marriage and social stratification in Pakistan by providing localized, empirical insights.
2. **Policy relevance:** By highlighting the extent to which social divisions still influence personal decisions, the study can inform efforts to reduce discrimination and promote social cohesion.
3. **Social impact:** Raising awareness about the persistence of caste and sect preferences can contribute to shifting attitudes, particularly among the youth and educated classes.

Research objectives and questions

To evaluate the impact of caste and sect affiliations on marriage decision-making in Chakwal, Punjab, while considering other social variables such as education, income, and family pressure.

Research Questions (RQs):

- How significantly do caste and sect systems influence marriage decisions in Chakwal, Punjab?

Secondary RQs:

- What role does family pressure play in enforcing caste/sect-based marriages?
- To what extent do education and economic status mitigate or reinforce caste/sect preferences in spouse selection?

Literature review

Marriage in South Asian societies is a deeply social institution, one that transcends individual choice and is shaped by various cultural, religious, and socio-economic forces. Among the most influential of these are caste and sect systems, which continue to determine the boundaries of socially acceptable marital unions. While some scholars argue that modernity, education, and economic development are eroding these boundaries, others provide compelling evidence for their enduring relevance, particularly in rural and semi-urban regions like Chakwal, Punjab.

1. Caste and marriage in South Asia: The caste system, although more prominently associated with Hindu social structure, has been absorbed into Muslim communities in Pakistan and India due to historical cohabitation and cultural convergence [1,2]. In Muslim-majority Pakistan, castes are often termed “biradari” or “quoms,” referring to kinship or occupational groups such as Rajputs, Awans, Syeds, Jatts, and Gujjars. According to Shah [3], biradari functions as a dominant unit of social organization, particularly when it comes to marriage, where endogamy—marrying within the same caste—is often strictly enforced.

Qadeer [4] argues that caste-based marriage is not only a matter of identity but also of social capital, as families use matrimonial alliances to secure or elevate their social standing. This aligns with Bourdieu’s [5] concept of “marriage markets,” where economic and symbolic capital are traded to preserve or enhance family prestige.

2. Sectarianism and marital preferences: Religious sects also shape marriage decisions, particularly in Pakistan, where Sunni-Shia tensions have long been part of the socio-religious landscape. Within Sunni Islam, distinctions among Bareilvi, Deobandi, and Ahl-e-Hadith sects add further layers of complexity. Marriage across sects is often discouraged or



rejected outright due to concerns about religious compatibility, doctrinal purity, and family honor [6].

A study by Zaman [7] found that sect-based preferences are particularly strong in religious households, where marrying into another sect may be seen as a deviation from faith. However, Ahmad [8] noted a growing flexibility among urban youth, especially those exposed to secular education or global media.

3. Intersection of caste and sect: While caste and sect are often treated as separate identity markers, in practice, they intersect and reinforce each other. For instance, a Syed family may be both caste-conscious and strictly sectarian, preferring matches only within their sect and caste. This creates multiple layers of social filtering, where finding a suitable marriage partner becomes a process of navigating narrow social boundaries.

Research by Durrani [9] indicates that these dual affiliations become even more pronounced in semi-urban areas like Chakwal, where both traditional and modern values coexist. In such areas, outward markers of modernity (such as higher education or employment) often coexist with rigid caste and sect-based social codes.

4. Role of family and social pressure: Parental authority and elder involvement remain central in Pakistani marriage decisions. Several studies [10,11] suggest that family elders often invoke caste and sect compatibility as essential criteria for a “respectable” marriage. The notion of “izzat” (family honor) is tightly linked to marriage decisions, and marrying outside one’s caste or sect may lead to familial conflict or social ostracism.

In a survey conducted by Khan and Riaz [12], 82% of respondents indicated that their parents had the final say in selecting their spouse. This underscores the patriarchal control over marriage and how caste/sect identities become tools to enforce conformity and limit autonomy.

5. Modernization and emerging trends: Despite these traditional forces, the impact of modernization, education, urbanization, and media exposure is gradually altering marriage preferences, especially among younger generations. Studies by Malik [13] and Zaheer [14] show that urban youth, especially those attending universities or living in large cities, are more open to inter-caste and inter-sect marriages.

However, the literature also cautions against overestimating these changes. As noted by Yusuf [15], even educated individuals may revert to traditional norms under family pressure, especially during the actual matchmaking process. Therefore, while attitudes may be shifting, behavioral change remains slow and uneven across regions.

6. Caste and sect in the context of Chakwal: Chakwal, with its blend of rural traditions and urban exposure, presents

a unique case. The region is known for its tight-knit caste-based communities, and biradari ties strongly influence marriage decisions [16]. Marriages are often arranged within the extended family or caste network, and inter-caste marriages are rare and sometimes contested.

A qualitative study by Bhatti [17] highlighted how caste hierarchies are used to determine the “marriage worthiness” of a family. Similarly, sectarian identity, while less visible, is a subtle but important filter, especially during rishta (proposal) evaluations. Religious practices, sect-specific rituals, and even prayer methods may become points of contention in marriage negotiations.

7. Gaps in the literature: Although there is a growing body of research on caste and sect in South Asian marriages, several gaps remain:

- Most studies are qualitative or anecdotal, with limited quantitative evidence.
- Very few focus specifically on semi-urban or rural districts like Chakwal.
- The interaction between caste, sect, education, and income remains underexplored in statistical terms.
- There is a lack of gender-disaggregated data showing how caste and sect affect males and females differently in the marriage market.

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research design to analyze the role of caste and sect systems in shaping marriage decisions in Chakwal, Punjab. A structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale was used to collect data. The study aimed to statistically test how caste and sect affiliations influence marital choices, alongside moderating factors such as education, income, and parental pressure.

Research design

This is a descriptive and correlational study. The primary data collection method was a self-administered questionnaire composed of both demographic and attitudinal items. The questionnaire was designed in English and Urdu to enhance comprehension.

Population and sampling

The target population included married and unmarried individuals aged 18–60 from various caste and sect backgrounds residing in Chakwal. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure inclusion of different caste and sect groups.

- **Sample size:** 300 respondents
- **Gender distribution:** 160 females, 140 males

- **Age range:** 18–60 years
- **Sampling method:** Purposive, stratified by caste (e.g., Awan, Rajput, Jatt, Syed) and sect (e.g., Sunni-Barelvi, Sunni-Deobandi, Shia)

Questionnaire dimensions and sample items

Variable	Item Example	No. of Items	Scale
Caste Importance	"Caste similarity is essential in selecting a life partner."	6	Likert (1–5)
Sect Importance	"I prefer a spouse from the same religious sect."	5	Likert (1–5)
Parental Pressure	"My family would not approve of inter-caste marriage."	6	Likert (1–5)
Education and Modernity	"Educated individuals should marry beyond caste lines."	5	Likert (1–5)
Socioeconomic Compatibility	"Income and job status are more important than caste."	4	Likert (1–5)
Marriage Decision Autonomy	"I had complete freedom to choose my partner."	4	Likert (1–5)

Data collection procedure

The questionnaire was distributed in both paper and digital formats. Local community leaders and educational institutions in Chakwal assisted in facilitating access to participants. Respondents were informed about the confidentiality of their responses, and written consent was obtained before participation.

Data analysis techniques

Collected data was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The following statistical methods were used:

Analysis Type	Purpose
Descriptive Statistics	To summarize demographic and response patterns
Pearson Correlation	To examine relationships between variables
Multiple Linear Regression	To assess the predictive power of caste and sect
ANOVA (if applicable)	To test group differences based on caste/sect

Reliability and validity

Pilot Testing: The questionnaire was pre-tested with 30 individuals to ensure clarity and reliability.

Cronbach's Alpha: Overall reliability score = 0.81, indicating high internal consistency

Ethical considerations

The research complied with ethical standards:

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants.
- Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time.
- Data was kept anonymous and confidential.

Results and analysis

This section presents the findings from the survey

conducted on 300 respondents in Chakwal, Punjab, regarding the role of caste and sect systems in marriage decisions. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression.

Demographic Variable	Frequency (n=300)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
- Male	140	46.7
- Female	160	53.3
Age		
- 18–30 years	110	36.7
- 31–45 years	130	43.3
- 46–60 years	60	20.0
Caste Groups		
- Awan	75	25.0
- Rajput	60	20.0
- Jatt	50	16.7
- Syed	55	18.3
- Others	60	20.0
Sect Groups		
- Sunni-Barelvi	130	43.3
- Sunni-Deobandi	90	30.0
- Shia	80	26.7

Descriptive statistics of key variables

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Caste Importance	4.12	0.76	High importance of caste in marriage
Sect Importance	3.85	0.82	Moderate to high importance of sect
Parental Pressure	4.05	0.70	Strong parental influence reported
Education Influence	3.30	0.90	Moderate belief in education reducing caste barriers.
Socioeconomic Factors	3.40	0.88	Moderate importance of income/job status
Marriage Autonomy	2.75	0.95	Low perceived personal autonomy

Correlation analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the relationships between caste importance, sect importance, parental pressure, education influence, and marriage autonomy.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Caste Importance	1				
2. Sect Importance	.62**	1			
3. Parental Pressure	.71**	.54**	1		
4. Education Influence	-.45**	-.39**	-.40**	1	
5. Marriage Autonomy	-.52**	-.48**	-.57**	.56**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$

- There is a strong positive correlation between caste importance and parental pressure ($r = .71$), indicating that families emphasize caste in marriage decisions.
- Education negatively correlates with caste and sect importance, showing that higher education is associated with less emphasis on caste/sect.
- Marriage autonomy correlates negatively with caste, sect, and parental pressure, suggesting individuals



with stronger caste/sect/family pressure perceive less autonomy.

Multiple linear regression

To test the predictive effect of caste, sect, parental pressure, education, and socioeconomic factors on marriage decision autonomy, the following regression model was used:

Dependent variable: Marriage Autonomy

Independent variables: Caste Importance, Sect Importance, Parental Pressure, Education Influence, Socioeconomic Factors.

Predictor	B	SE B	Beta	t	p - value
(Constant)	4.05	0.28		14.46	.000
Caste Importance	-0.42	0.07	-0.36	-6.00	.000
Sect Importance	-0.25	0.06	-0.22	-4.17	.000
Parental Pressure	-0.33	0.05	-0.40	-6.60	.000
Education Influence	0.38	0.07	0.31	5.43	.000
Socioeconomic Factors	0.21	0.06	0.19	3.50	.001

- **Model summary:** R = 0.75, R² = 0.56, Adjusted R² = 0.55, F(5,294) = 74.67, p < 0.001
- This indicates that 56% of the variance in marriage autonomy is explained by the predictors.

Interpretation

- Caste importance, sect importance, and parental pressure negatively predict marriage autonomy, meaning the stronger these influences, the less autonomy individuals perceive in their marriage decisions.
- Education influence and socioeconomic factors positively predict marriage autonomy, suggesting higher education and economic status enable more freedom in spouse choice.

The strongest negative predictor is parental pressure, emphasizing the family’s role in enforcing caste and sect norms.

Summary of findings

Finding	Implication
High caste importance (M=4.12)	Caste remains a dominant criterion in marriage decisions
Sect importance moderately high (M=3.85)	Sect is important, especially in religious families
Strong parental pressure (M=4.05)	Family elders heavily influence decisions
Education reduces caste and sect rigidity.	Education helps reduce traditional marriage constraints.
Low autonomy reported (M=2.75)	Individuals often have limited freedom in spouse selection

Suggestions and recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several actionable recommendations are proposed to address the deep-rooted

influence of caste and sect systems on marriage decisions in Chakwal, Punjab. These recommendations aim to promote greater autonomy in marriage decisions, reduce social pressures, and encourage more inclusive marital practices.

Scope and limitations

The study focuses on Chakwal District, and findings may not be generalizable to all of Punjab or Pakistan. The use of a quantitative methodology limits the depth of personal narratives and cultural interpretations that qualitative methods might uncover. However, the survey-based design allows for the collection of structured, comparable data across a larger population sample.

Additionally, the study is restricted to individuals aged 18–60, both male and female, from different caste and sect backgrounds, who have either undergone or been involved in the process of marriage selection.

Promote educational awareness programs

The study revealed that education has a significant positive impact on reducing caste and sect rigidity in marriage decisions. Therefore, it is vital to:

- Expand access to higher education in Chakwal, particularly targeting young women and marginalized castes/sects.
- Incorporate modules on social equality, human rights, and inter-community harmony in school and college curricula to sensitize youth about the drawbacks of caste- and sect-based discrimination.

Conduct community workshops and seminars that highlight the benefits of inter-caste and inter-sect marriages for social cohesion and economic progress.

Empower individuals, especially women

Marriage autonomy was found to be low, with family pressure dominating decision-making. To enhance individual agency:

- Initiate empowerment programs focusing on negotiation skills, self-confidence, and legal rights regarding marriage decisions.
- Encourage support groups and counseling centers where young people, especially women, can discuss marital choices free from familial coercion.
- Promote legal awareness campaigns informing individuals about their rights to freely choose spouses without fear of social backlash or violence.

Engage religious and community leaders

Given the significant role of sectarian identity, religious leaders can be influential change agents:



- Encourage inter-sect dialogue and tolerance-building initiatives led by respected community and religious leaders.
- Promote sermons and community messages that emphasize unity and inclusiveness, challenging sectarian prejudices related to marriage.
- Facilitate inter-sect marriages as positive examples through community recognition and celebration.

Address parental and family influence

As family elders exert strong influence, interventions should focus on:

- Organizing family-centered counseling sessions to discuss the harms of rigid caste/sect preferences and the benefits of more flexible approaches.
- Using mass media campaigns to showcase stories of successful marriages across caste and sect lines, reducing stigma.

Promote legal protections and social support for individuals resisting forced or arranged marriages based solely on caste and sect considerations.

Encourage policy interventions

At the governmental and institutional level:

- Develop policies promoting social integration and anti-discrimination in marriage practices.
- Provide incentives for educational institutions and workplaces that encourage diverse social mixing, facilitating inter-caste and inter-sect interactions.
- Support research and monitoring to track progress in reducing caste and sect barriers in marriages over time.

Facilitate socioeconomic uplift

Economic status was also found to enable greater marriage autonomy:

- Launch skills training and employment programs for youth from lower caste and sect backgrounds to improve their social and economic bargaining power.
- Promote microfinance and entrepreneurship opportunities that empower marginalized communities, reducing their dependency on traditional caste structures.

Conclusion

This study underscores the persistent influence of caste and sect systems on marriage decisions in Chakwal, limiting individual freedom and perpetuating social divisions. The suggested interventions—spanning education, empowerment,

community engagement, family dynamics, and policy reforms—provide a roadmap to gradually dismantle these barriers and foster more inclusive, autonomous, and equitable marital practices. The marriage patterns show that mostly marriages were arranged between first cousins and close relatives (from the 1960s through 1980s). About one-half of the landowners are married to their first cousins, and the other half within their major caste. Mostly, marriages of the respondents are arranged by their parents, and some by close relatives. It is observed that choices of marriage partners have diversified. To some extent, compatibility on the basis of kinship and caste affiliation is substituted by education and economic status. Qadeer [18], in his analysis of marriage patterns in Pakistani society, also states that marriages are based on economic status more than the caste. The rational choice approach could be useful in explaining this phenomenon. Individuals seek to choose marriage partners on the basis of better economic statuses and prospects, as proposed by Coleman [19]. The emergence of the class system appears to have replaced strong caste orientation in the village [20].

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