

## A GIFT FOR INDIA'S INTER-CASTE COUPLES



**BARRIERS:** *Daduram Balai and his higher-caste wife, Jyoti Prajapati, at home in Madhya Pradesh state. "We've never allowed caste to come between us," he said. Even after they married, Prajapati's parents tried to get her to dump him.*

In an effort to dissolve the ancient social system, the government is giving cash to anyone who marries 'down.'

By Henry Chu, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
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**BAIRAGHAR**, India—Plenty of women may feel they deserve an award for marrying their husbands, but Madhavi Arwar is actually getting one—from the Indian government, no less.

Not that her husband, Chandrashekhar, is a bad sort. In fact, he's a good-looking guy, holds a steady job at an insurance company and dotes on their apple-cheeked son.

But he is also a *Dalit*, or an "untouchable," the lowest of the low under India's ancient caste system. Madhavi is not a *Dalit*, and for marrying "down" the social ladder, she is entitled to \$250 in cash, plus a certificate of appreciation.

"I was a bit amazed that even for a thing like marriage, they were giving money," Madhavi, 33, said as she sat in her living room here in central India.

The windfall is part of the government's campaign to chop away at the barriers of caste, the complex hierarchy wherein a person's place in society is determined purely by birth.

As India struggles to modernize and transform itself into an important world player economically, officials know they need to erase these age-old divisions and expand opportunities for social mobility for all the country's 1.1 billion people, including the majority who have historically been considered low-caste and oppressed.

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Mandatory quotas in education and public-sector jobs have been in place for years. Now private companies, the engine of India's rapid economic growth, are also looking to train and hire more employees from lower-caste backgrounds.

The integration efforts have enjoyed some success, especially in booming cities such as New Delhi and Mumbai, where caste distinctions are somewhat blurred. High-caste *Brahmins* sit next to *Dalits* on packed public buses. Upper-caste Indians, who in the countryside might refuse to draw water from the same well as lower castes and "untouchables" for fear of "spiritual contamination," are served by low-caste waiters in chic new restaurants. *Dalits* occupy some of the highest positions in the Indian government.

## LAST HOLDOUT

But one institution has proved stubbornly resistant to change: marriage.

Scan the matrimonial ads in any Sunday newspaper, and the importance of caste quickly becomes apparent. In a country where the vast majority of marriages are arranged, parents seeking spouses for their children tout their eligible "*Agarwal*," "*Khatri*," "*Gupta*," "*Gujjar*" or "*Jat*" sons and daughters, all names of castes or of communities whose caste affiliation is immediately understood.

In a survey last year by the New Delhi-based Center for the Study of Developing Societies, 74% of Indians said inter-caste marriages were unacceptable, despite a law passed 52 years ago that expressly affirmed an individual's right to wed whomever he or she chooses.

"It's very difficult," Meira Kumar, India's minister of social justice and empowerment, acknowledged in an interview. "You can't legislate the mind-set. You can't order an attitude."

The caste system traces back thousands of years in India, although its exact origin and how it evolved to its present form is the subject of debate.

People were generally divided among four groups: the *Brahmins*, or priestly caste; a kingly and warrior caste; a merchant caste; and a caste of agricultural, service and manual laborers. Those labeled "untouchable" were considered so unclean that they did not even technically belong to a caste and were outside the system, assigned the most degrading jobs, some of which persist today, such as cleaning out communal toilets with little more than their bare hands.

Modern India began with a vision of a society based on dignity for all, and caste discrimination was outlawed after independence in 1947. But notions of caste, which is inherited from the paternal line, continue to exert a heavy influence on politics and society and, despite being identified with Hinduism, cut across religious lines to affect Muslims and Christians as well.

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Nowhere is this truer than with regard to marriage, a stronghold of caste and the means by which group segregation has been maintained and reinforced over the centuries.

Although no official data exist on the number of inter-caste couples, experts doubt that such alliances make up more than a tiny fraction of the total. Most probably are elopements or “love marriages,” rather than arranged matches.

## **A DANGEROUS STEP**

The consequences of breaking with tradition, particularly by marrying an “untouchable,” can be severe.

Inter-caste couples who defy their parents’ wishes often are banished from their families. Hostile village elders find ways to invalidate such unions, sometimes by alleging that one of the partners was coerced and throwing the other in jail. Or the couple is hounded out of the community, their homes and property forfeit.

“People are morally, ethically, wittingly or unwittingly committed to this system,” said Pawan Kumar Shrivastava, who works for the state government of *Madhya Pradesh*, in a department devoted to helping *Dalits* and other oppressed groups. “It’s so ingrained in our social system that whenever anybody tries to break away from it, to deviate from the norms, he faces social wrath.”

In some cases, relatives have resorted to “honor killings.” Last year, a *Brahmin* man and two friends from a town near *Mumbai*, formerly known as Bombay, were sentenced to hang for murdering the *Brahmin*’s brother-in-law and three others, to avenge the “insult” of his sister having married into a lower caste.

Near New Delhi a few years ago, an upper-caste girl and *Dalit* boy were publicly executed by relatives because of their romance, said Prem Chowdhry, who has written a book on non-traditional marriages.

“They were brought back and killed in front of the entire village—a), to redeem the honor of the family, and b), to set an example,” Chowdhry said. “It was clearly a spectacle. It was done to frighten people into not imitating them.”

The Indian Supreme Court has condemned such killings as barbaric, declaring inter-caste marriages “in the national interest, as they will result in destroying the caste system.”

But the government’s attempt to play Cupid, with a fistful of cash instead of a quiver of arrows, has had meager results.

Here in *Madhya Pradesh*, a state of 60 million people, only 97 couples in the last fiscal year claimed the \$250 government award for marriages between *Dalits* and non-*Dalits*. Only 14

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couples took advantage of the incentive program in the eastern state of *Bihar*, where caste antagonism among some communities seethes so strongly that some landlords maintain personal militias, sometimes leading to armed battle.

Kumar, the minister of social justice and empowerment, said the number of inter-caste couples likely is higher, because not all know about or bother to claim the award. But she has ordered the bonus increased to \$1,250, a hefty sum in a land where unadjusted annual per capita income is less than half that.

For Daduram Balai and Jyoti Prajapati, getting married had nothing to do with government handouts and everything to do with following their hearts.

They met in school as teenagers. By then, Balai, a *Dalit*, already had been stung by discrimination. When he touched the belongings of a high-caste boy at school, the boy's family had them burned. Upper-caste villagers sometimes sprinkled the road behind him with water from the holy Ganges River, to purge it of the "stain" of his "untouchability."

So after Balai and Prajapati tied the knot 12 years ago, he wasn't surprised when his bride's parents tried to dissuade their higher-caste daughter to dump her new husband. She refused.

"We've never allowed caste to come between us," said Balai, 33.

Both sides of the family eventually became reconciled to the couple's relationship. Balai and Prajapati now have two young sons and live in *Bhopal*, the capital of *Madhya Pradesh*.

They have no concerns about whom their boys will one day choose as wives.

"It's entirely up to them," Balai said.

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## EXTRA CREDIT ON TOP OF EXTRA CREDIT!

Define the following term:

1. *Dalit*
2. *Agarwa*
3. *.Khatri*
4. *Gupta*
5. *Gujjar*
6. *Jat*