

## **Caste Based Endogamy in a Punjabi Village of Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

Caste based endogamy is one of the main characteristics of traditional caste system practiced in rural Pakistan. Members of different *quoms* do not inter-marry or at least do not prefer to marry out of their *quom*. While social acceptance for inter *quom* marriages among different landowning *quoms* is increasing in Punjabi villages, inter marriages between landowning *quoms* and service providing *quoms* are normatively discouraged even at present. As a result, members of landowning *quoms* and service providing *quoms* do not form kinship associations, which reproduce them as two mutually exclusive social groups placing landowning *quoms* at a higher and service providing *quoms* at a lower status category. Caste based status differences across landowning *quoms* and service providing *quoms* and emphasis on collective life in rural setting are seen as the main reasons that reinforce caste based endogamy. Educational, economic or professional accomplishments of the members of service providing *quoms* do not affect the structure of caste based endogamy in Punjabi villages. Though a few incidents of elopement marriages among landowning *quoms* and service providing *quoms* are found, such marriages do not generally gain social approval.

Keywords: Caste, Endogamy, Punjabi Villages, Rural Punjab, Inter *Quom* Marriages, Landowning *Quoms*, Service Providing *Quoms*.

### **Introduction**

This article examines the dynamics of caste based endogamy across traditional landowning *quoms* and service providing *quoms* in the contemporary Punjabi villages of Pakistan. Caste system in rural Punjab exists in the form of indigenous hierarchical groupings like *quom* or *zaat* and represents division of society into birth-ascribed status groups based on parentage occupations (Lyon, 2004). Contrary to classical categories of Hindu caste system i.e. Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, the major caste divisions in Punjabi villages are found

between landowning *quoms* and service providing *quoms* (Ahmad, 1970; Eglar, 1960). Different landowning *quoms* traditionally associated with cultivation as their parentage occupation are called *zamindars*. Members of a *zamindar quom* residing in a village own land with varying size of their landholdings. On the other hand, members of different artisan and service providing *quoms* e.g. barber, carpenter, cobbler, blacksmith, weaver, potter, *Musalli* (labourer) are jointly called as *kammi*. Traditionally, *kammi* serve the villagers as labour or with the occupational crafts associated with their *quom* that they inherit from their ancestors (Ahmad, 1970; Alavi, 1972; Eglar, 1960).

Division of rural Punjab into landowning *quoms* and service providing *quoms* and the dynamics of their social relationships are traditionally organized around the birth-ascribed status in a *quom*, occupational specializations associated with different *quoms* by parentage, endogamy and kinship system (*biradari*), hierarchical positioning of different *quoms* and labour relations (Ahmad, 1970; Eglar, 1960; Lyon, 2004; Nadvi & Robinson, 2004). However, the caste system in rural Punjab has changed over time and its characteristic need revision e.g. labour relations (Chaudhary, 1999; Lyon, 2004). The traditional labour relation between *zamindars* and *kammi* is known as *Seyp* system in which *kammi* used to work as labour for *zamindars* besides serving the villagers with their parentage crafts. *Kammi* earned their livelihood predominantly through their caste based occupations (Eglar, 1960). Different studies have explored that the caste based occupations of *kammi* are in decline because of the availability of alternative employment opportunities e.g. industrial and government jobs. Moreover, there are increasing trends among *kammi* to migrate towards cities and foreign countries for earning purposes. As a result, the traditional labour relations between *kammi* and *zamindars* have been transformed and are coming to an end with the passage of time (Chaudhary, 1999; Hooper and Hamid, 2003). However, it is important to note that though *kammi* in contemporary rural Punjab are increasingly opting for other professions, they are always identified in the village setting through their parentage occupations e.g. barber, carpenter etc (Lyon, 2004). A few *kammi* in a Punjabi village may own some land and thus cultivate. Nevertheless, they are not given the status of being *zamindars* since this status is associated with the *quom* membership and not the material possessions (Eglar, 1960; Lyon, 2004). The above discussion shows how at least two main characteristics of the traditional caste system practiced in Punjabi villages have transformed over time i.e. occupational specializations of *kammi* and labour relations. As a result, the dynamics of asymmetrical interaction among *kammi quoms* and *zamindar quoms* in the village sphere have changed, with less economic dependence of *kammi* on *zamindars* (Chaudhary, 1999). However, *zamindars* and *kammi* are always recognized and differentiated from each other in the village setting on the basis of their parentage occupations and *quom* membership and not through the occupations they opt for later in their life. It suggests that the caste occupations are still relevant in terms of identity where birth ascribed status remains the fundamental feature of the caste system in rural Punjab (Lyon, 2004).

Besides the above mentioned characteristics, a key feature of the traditional caste system practiced in rural Punjab is that different *quoms* are endogamous groups (Eglar, 1960). However, there are hardly any studies exploring the changing dynamics of caste based endogamy across *kammi* and *zamindars* and thus the changes in their kinship relations i.e. biradari formation. On the other side, while talking about the changing caste dynamics in modern India, Sharma (2004) mentioned that the inter caste marriages are increasing. Nevertheless, Sharma also highlighted that the inter caste marriages are not sanctified in the traditional Hindu communities even at present where endogamous form of marriage is used as a mean to preserve purity within the caste groups. Similarly, caste based endogamy is practiced in rural Pakistan as well and members of different *quoms* do not inter-marry or at least do not prefer to marry out of their *quom* (Alavi, 1972; Barth, 1960; Eglar, 1960; Leach, 1969). Eglar (1960) pointed out that a child in a Punjabi village learns about caste based endogamy as a part of his/her childhood socialization. While a few other studies suggest that the different landowning *quoms* in rural Pakistan inter-marry (Blood, 1994; Nadvi & Robinson, 2004), literature does not provide any evidence about marriages between landowning *quoms* and service providing *quoms*. The present study attempts to investigate the caste based endogamy and kinship formation across *kammi* and *zamindar quoms* and its changing dynamics in contemporary rural Punjab in Pakistan.

## Research Methodology

The study was conducted in two villages of Punjab province in Pakistan, one in the arid and other in the irrigated agricultural zone. The irrigated zone's village is located in the Ferozewala tehsil of district Sheikhpura, whereas the arid zone's village was selected from tehsil and district Chakwal. Since the present study intended to examine the inter-group relations between landowning *quoms* and service providing *quoms*, it was ensured that the selected villages are inhabited by the traditional *zamindar* and *Kammi quoms*. In the irrigated zone's village, along with Virk Jats as the major landowning *quom*, Awan *biradari* has a few households. These traditional *zamindar quoms*, Virk Jats and Awans, have kinship relations through inter *quom* marriages. *Kammi quoms* residing in the village are barber, cobbler, carpenter, blacksmith, potter, Dindar (sweepers), weaver, and Mirasi (village bard). The irrigated zone's village consists of approximately 325 households and 2500 individuals. *Zamindars* comprise around 82% of the total population, compared with 18% of *kammi*. An overwhelming majority of the *kammi* in the irrigated zone's village is working as labourers for *zamindars*; only a few of them are educated and better off. On the other side, the arid zone's village belongs to Minhas Rajputs. *Kammi quoms* living in the village are barber, cobbler, potter, carpenter, blacksmith, Musalli (labourers) and weaver. The arid zone's village consists of around 265 households and 1900 individuals. *Kammi* of the village makeup only 25% of the total population, compared with 75% of

*zamindars*. *Kammi* in the arid zone's village are more educated and better off than their counterparts in the irrigated zone's village. However, quite a few of them still work as labourers and are associated with their caste based occupations.

In order to collect data, in-depth interviews were conducted with men and women from landowning *quoms* and service providing *quoms* residing in selected villages. The sampling strategy was guided by the theoretical and analytical considerations and thus implies theoretical sampling. A sample of 64 respondents was selected; 32 respondents from each of the arid zone's village and the irrigated zone's village. Along with caste and gender of the respondents, the factor of age was also considered in order to make the sample more diversified. While selecting the sample, representation was given to all *zamindar* and *Kammi* biradaris residing in the villages. Besides labourer *Kammi*, the sample included educated and better off *Kammi* who had left their caste based occupations, which helped to examine how the dynamics of caste based endogamy are changing as a result of *Kammi* increasingly leaving their traditional caste based occupations. Female research assistants were recruited and trained to conduct interviews with women research participants. Keeping in view the ethical consideration of the study, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents was protected. After conducting the fieldwork, the data was translated, transcribed, and coded using Express Scribe Software. Subsequently, the major themes and sub themes were identified by referring to the initial coding.

## **Research Findings**

Most of the Punjabi villages in Pakistan are owned by either Rajputs or Jats who trace their heritage to their pre Islam ancestors in the region. Some of the other non-native *quoms* e.g. Awans also own some villages in the central and North Punjab and, along with Rajputs and Jats, constitute an occupational category that traditionally emphasize agriculture related occupations. They all are considered as the traditional cultivator *quoms* i.e. *zamindars* and inter marry (Blood, 1994; Nadvi & Robinson, 2004). While a few research studies highlight the existence of caste based endogamy across different *zamindar quoms* (Ahmad, 1970; Eglar, 1960), there is hardly any evidence of inter *quom* marriages between landowning *quoms* and service providing *quoms* in Punjabi villages.

The present study explored that the inter-marriages between *zamindars* and *Kammi* are normatively discouraged in the contemporary Punjabi villages. However, the rules of endogamy differ across *zamindar quoms* and *Kammi quoms*. Rajputs in the arid zone's village and Jats in the irrigated zone's village highlighted that they prefer to marry within their *quoms* i.e. Rajputs within Rajputs or Jats within Jats. Otherwise, they opt for some other *zamindar quom* e.g. Rajputs with Jats or vice versa. It was found that the Rajputs in the arid zone's village and Jats in the irrigated zone's village hesitate to marry within Arains, Kashmiris, and few other *quoms* that came into prominence later and are considered as lower, by

Rajputs and Jats, on the hierarchy of *zamindar quoms*. However, such marriages are on the increase over time. The older respondents, in particular, were against marrying outside their *quoms*. For example, Mushtaq (62, *zamindar* man, irrigated zone) was of the view that:

Nowadays, young men do not take care that they should keep their lineage pure, by not marrying within other *quoms*. As a result, there is a lot of mixture of different *quoms* in villages. Jats are marrying even within Arains (laughter). In our times, Jats used to abstain from doing it since it was considered against caste pride. It does not matter nowadays. I can talk about many such marriages in our village or nearby villages.

This suggests that the social acceptance for inter *quom* marriages among *zamindars* is increasing. While such marriages are on the increase, villagers may criticize the families marrying within *quoms* considered lower on the hierarchy of *zamindars*. Talking about one such marriage that recently took place in their village, Furkan (28, *zamindar* man, arid zone) said:

Villagers gossip that Rajput family have given their daughter in Arains, a lower *quom*. No one is considering that groom's family is highly educated and better off; they only talk about their *quom*.

The above discussion shows that the criterion of endogamy among *zamindars* is quite flexible and they may marry within other landowning *quoms*. Conversely, the rules of endogamy among *Kammi* are strict and they do not marry outside their occupational *quoms*. While looking at the patterns of political patronage in Punjabi villages in Pakistan, Lyon (2004) described that marrying within one's own occupational *quom* is not an absolute rule of endogamy among *Kammi* and they may marry within other *Kammi quoms* e.g. barbers within cobblers. On the contrary, all of the *Kammi* respondents in the present research stressed that they marry only in their occupational *quoms* by parentage e.g. barbers within barbers, or carpenters within carpenters. Rejecting the idea of marrying outside their occupational group, a barber Sharif (56, *Kammi* man, irrigated zone) emphasized that:

We prefer to marry within our relatives, with children of our brothers and sisters. If we do not have a match in close relatives, we go for the ones who are also barbers or we do not marry. We would not accept a proposal even from *zamindars*

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because we marry only within our occupational group.

The *Kammi* villagers considered it a matter of honour to remain attached to their caste based parentage identity and biradari membership, especially while living in the forefather's village. Sajid (24, *Kammi* man, irrigated zone) highlighted that *Kammi* maintain the exclusive identity of their forefathers in village by not marrying outside their occupational group by parentage. Similarly, Riaz (48, *Kammi* man, arid zone) described that:

We consider it against our caste based pride to marry outside our occupational group. If *zamindars* do not marry with *Kammi*, we *Kammi* are even stricter; we abstain from marrying not only in other *Kammi quoms* but in *zamindars* as well. There is no question of being higher or lower in case of marriages, it is the issue of honour and pride of one's *quom* and parentage.

Riaz emphasized that their lineage is purer than *zamindars* who may get marry out of their *quoms* e.g. a Gujjar man with a Jat woman. Conversely, a few of the young *Kammi* respondents (e.g. Fahad, 28, arid zone) suggested that they would marry a woman from another *Kammi quom* considering the financial position of her family, or even a *zamindar* woman, since everyone aspires for higher social status. However, they were critical of allowing their own women to marry outside their occupational *quoms*, and considered it against their caste based pride. It suggests how Punjabis associate honour with the women in family/biradari and these notions of honour play a role in defining the rules of caste based endogamy, especially among *Kammi*.

### Factors Strengthening Caste Based Endogamy

The study found two main factors strengthening the caste based endogamy between *Kammi quoms* and *zamindar quoms* i.e. caste based status differences and emphasis on collective life in the village setting. The majority of respondents suggested that they prefer to marry within those equal to their social status while caste was seen as the primary factor determining one's social status in the village life. After that, the villagers may give consideration to the ownership of economic assets of other family, and educational/professional accomplishments of the men/women in the process of spouse selection. Correspondingly, *zamindar* respondents highlighted the parentage occupational identity of *Kammi* and thus their lower standing on the status hierarchy as the major reason of caste based endogamy between *Kammi* and *zamindars*. Lifelong stigma of being *Kammi*

always keeps *Kammi* inferior in terms of identity and status in the village setting. Zahida (63, *zamindar* woman, irrigated zone) discussed it as follows:

Marrying within *Kammi* will bring shame upon our family name. People will gossip about us that “they have established kinship relations with *Kammi*, whose forefathers used to polish the shoes of their forefathers, who used to sit in their feet, and who used to get grains from their grain pots”.

It is a commonly held belief among *zamindars* in the Punjabi villages that inferiority becomes part of *Kammi*’ blood and habits, even if they leave their caste based occupations. Kandeel (21, *zamindar* woman, arid zone) repeatedly mentioned that even if they acquire education or attain professional accomplishments, *Kammi* would always reflect their inferiority in their dealings with relatives. Hence, it is not appropriate for *zamindars* to marry within *Kammi*. Correspondingly, the researchers were interested to know the views of *Kammi* respondents about inter *quom* marriages between *zamindars* and *Kammi*. The researchers asked it from both categories of *Kammi* i.e. who had left low graded tasks and those still working as service providers. Interestingly, the responses of both categories were similar and they considered that marriages between *zamindar quoms* and *Kammi quoms* are not encouraged because of their status difference on the caste hierarchy and thus the social standing. Kaneez (46, *Kammi* woman, arid zone), a housemaid in *zamindar*’s houses, said that:

Better to remain within your own ones. If you make friendships with camels then you need to higher the doors of your entrance and there emerge complexities. We do not marry within *zamindars* because they are higher and we are lower.

Educational and professional accomplishments or financial well being of the caste members do not affect the structure of caste based endogamy between *zamindar quoms* and *Kammi quoms*. Even if a *Kammi* woman or man is highly educated, *zamindars* do not opt to marry with them. When asked about the option of choosing an educated *Kammi* woman as her daughter in law, Kaoser (50, *zamindar* woman, arid zone), mother of 3 sons, replied:

Even if a *Kammi* woman becomes a doctor or an engineer or her family is well off, Rajputs will never ask for the hand of that woman in marriage with their sons. We may go for an uneducated and a poor woman within our *quom* but never an educated or a rich *Kammi* woman.

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Kalsoom (35, *zamindar* woman, arid zone) narrated how a *Kammi* woman of their village having a law degree was married in a distant village to a man having high school education, only for the reason that he belonged to her occupational caste i.e. cobbler. Similarly, Asif (28, *Kammi* man, irrigated zone), an educated *Kammi* man having a government job, stressed that *zamindars* would never accept *Kammi* in kinship relation through marriages, even if a *Kammi* family is wealthy and does not work as service provider anymore.

Furthermore, the respondents explained how the emphasis on collective life in villages reinforces the caste based endogamy. Even if a member of *zamindar* biradari wishes to marry within *Kammi*, or vice versa, the social pressure from the family and other villagers would not let it happen. Abdullah (29, *zamindar* man, irrigated zone) said that:

A *zamindar* family will not marry in *Kammi* for the reason that the people in biradari and village would gossip and it brings shame upon family name.

Similarly, Jannat (51, *Kammi* woman, arid zone) mentioned that:

If someone wants to do it, our own brothers and sisters, biradari and other villagers will not let it happen. In villages people cannot take such decisions on their own, without the consultation and support of brothers and sisters (relatives).

This reflects how the social pressure compels villagers to conform to the caste based endogamy. Maintaining caste based pride in the village setting can be seen as central to Punjabi's identity. *Zamindars* do not marry in *Kammi* since society disapproves it. Similarly, *Kammi* considered it a source of pride to maintain the exclusive identity of their parentage by not marrying outside their occupational group.

In Punjabi villages, marriage is considered as a ritual that ties two families, and not two individuals. *Zamindars* stressed that they would not like to establish kinship relations with a *Kammi* family through marriage and interact with them as relatives in the village setting.

If we marry within *Kammi*, they will be visiting our houses, and we will be required to visit their houses like relatives and equals, it is not respectable among Rajputs (Raheel, 44, *zamindar* man, arid zone).

In conclusion, caste based endogamy persists as a clear divide between *kammi* and *zamindars* in the contemporary Punjabi villages. However, the rules of caste



based endogamy differ across *kammi* and *zamindars*. While different landowning *quoms* inter-marry, *kammi quoms* get marry only within their occupational groups by parentage. Caste remains the primary criterion in the process of spouse selection in terms of endogamy between *kammi quoms* and *zamindar quoms*. Educational and professional achievements and financial well being of the caste members do not affect the structure of caste based endogamy. The emphasis on group living strengthens the caste based endogamy in Punjabi villages.

## Elopement and Marriage - the Consequences

While the inter *quom* marriages among *kammi* and *zamindars* are socially discouraged, a few incidents of elopement and marriages among them were found. However, such marriages do not gain social approval. Ulfat (45, *zamindar* man, irrigated zone) suggested that *zamindar* men generally abstain from taking such step because:

*Zamindar* biradaris do not accept such marriages, and nor do the children as a result of that marriage would get an acceptance and respect in that *zamindar* biradari.

Ulfat explained how at times *zamindar* men fall in love with a *Kammi* woman for her beauty, elope with her and marry outside the village. Similarly, a *zamindar* woman may elope with and marry a *Kammi* man. However, the consequences of a *zamindar* man eloping with a *Kammi* woman were suggested to be totally different than a *zamindar* woman eloping with a *Kammi* man. If a *Kammi* woman elopes with a *zamindar* man, the majority of respondents thought that, in spite of the feelings of being humiliated, *Kammi* will be helpless to retaliate against *zamindars* who are dominant in the village context. While a few of the young *Kammi* emphasized that they would commit honour killing in such cases, it seems unlikely. Besides, there was no incident of revenge killing against *zamindars* committed by *Kammi* in the villages under study or surrounding villages. Conversely, the respondents believed that a *zamindar* woman and a *Kammi* man will elope and marry at the cost of their life:

There are life threats for both of them. For this reason, it rarely happens that they elope and marry. There can be illegal sexual relations between a *zamindar* woman and a *Kammi* man but elopement and marrying is rare because it is dangerous for them (Falaksher, 35, *zamindar* man, irrigated zone).

At times, a couple elopes and settles away from the village. They may not show up for a long time, or life time, owing to the risks of being killed. Akmal (33, *zamindar* man, arid zone) narrated how a few years ago a man from Musalli

biradari eloped with a Rajput woman and after getting married the couple settled in the city. All of the *zamindar* biradaris of the village united and announced that they would kill the man, the day he enters the village. Moreover, the family of a *Kammi* man who elopes with a *zamindar* woman is generally forced to leave the village; otherwise *zamindars* may commit violence against them. Jameela (57, *Kammi* woman, irrigated zone) talked about a recent incident in their village, when a *zamindar* woman eloped with and married a cobbler man and the cobbler family was displaced from the village.

A woman brings shame to the family when she elopes. Punjabis say that the woman has sold the respect of whole family by taking this step. On adopting such taboo ways of getting married *zamindars* may kill their women. It becomes humiliating especially for the male members of the family to face others in the village setting since they move more in the public sphere compared with their females. Moreover, in Pakistani society, men are considered as responsible for protecting the honour of the family that resides in the body and sexuality of their women (Encyclopaedia of Women's History, 1994; Irfan, 2008). Rukhsana (22, *Kammi* woman, irrigated zone) suggested that if *zamindars* do not kill such rebellious women, they are considered as dishonourable and everyone in the village points at them. Hence, they kill them in order to protect their honour. This reflects how the social norms act as a social pressure and force the members to abide by the cultural constructs of a society. Describing the feelings of his Rajput friend on elopement of his sister with a Musalli, Kamran (50, *zamindar* man, arid zone) said:

When his sister eloped with and married a Musalli, it was so embarrassing for my friend that he did not step out of his house for a few months; he was not able to face anyone. We (friends) used to take him out of his house and console him, but it took him a long time to get comfortable around in the village setting.

Discussing another dimension of the phenomenon, the respondents explained how *Kammi* change their caste identity after migrating to cities and thus they become eligible to marry in *zamindar quoms*. However, such marriages mostly terminate, as soon as the actual caste of *Kammi* is revealed. Sharing his family experience, Mushtaq (62, *zamindar* man, irrigated zone) said:

One of my cousins living in Lahore gave his daughter in marriage to a family who were weavers in their preceding generation in a village of Gujranwala district. After two years of marriage their actual caste was revealed; we asked those *Kammi* to divorce our woman and be away from our eyes forever.

It reflects the importance of caste based endogamy even in the urban settings of Punjab. Few such marriages were reported to have survived but only after a serious dispute among concerned families.

The above discussion shows while marriages between *Kammi* and *zamindars* following customary ways of getting married are unlikely in the Punjabi villages, a few incidents of elopement marriages can be found. However, such marriages generally do not gain social approval and may, at times, result in honour killing. Similarly, if *Kammi* marry within *zamindar quoms* in urban settings hiding their caste identity, the marriage usually terminates once the actual caste of *Kammi* is revealed. Caste based endogamy existed in both villages under study and was practiced in similar ways.

## Conclusion

Caste based endogamy persists as a clear divide between *Kammi quoms* and *zamindar quoms* in the contemporary Punjabi villages and, as a result, they do not form a biradari, kinship association. Caste based endogamy and principles of biradari formation place *Kammi quoms* and *zamindar quoms* in two mutually exclusive social groups, with *zamindars* at a higher and *Kammi* at a lower status category. However, the rules of caste based endogamy differ across *Kammi* and *zamindars*. While the different *zamindar quoms* inter-marry, *Kammi quoms* prefer to marry only within their occupational groups by parentage. Educational and professional achievements and financial well being of the members of service providing *quoms* do not affect the structure of caste based endogamy. Difference in caste based status across *Kammi* and *zamindars* and communal life creating social pressure on villagers strengthen the caste based endogamy in Punjabi villages. Though the marriages between *Kammi* and *zamindars* following customary ways of getting married are unlikely, a few incidents of elopement marriages can be found. However, such marriages generally do not gain social approval and, at times, may result in honour killing. Similarly, if *Kammi* marry within a *zamindar quom* in urban setting hiding their caste identity, the marriage usually terminates once the actual caste of *Kammi* is revealed.

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