

Mahati Kopparla: “Caste”ing Shadows

Historically speaking, the idea of caste divisions held significant weight in India. In fact, the caste system greatly influenced the conditions in India. **Caste** was a major factor in the structure of India’s society and provided a means for keeping those structures whole and controlled. One way of preserving these structures was through marriage.

Mahati Kopparla recalls the importance her family places on marriage. “Arranged marriages are big for us, when looking for a match, families



restrict who they are looking for to their own caste.” Mahati was born in Hyderabad Andhra Pradesh. Growing up in nearby Bangalore, Mahati attended a private Hindu school. Because the public schools in India were not as good as private schools, Mahati’s

parents preferred private school. “In general, middle and high-income families prefer not to send their students to public school. Instead, they send them to **English medium schools**.

The strict **adherence** to caste varies among Indian people. While Mahati and her parents are more accepting, she recalls the importance her grandparents placed on caste. While she didn’t feel caste limited her opportunities, she did feel it greatly influenced who the women in her family were allowed to marry. “If my family can’t find anyone then they branch off onto different castes.” In India, there is a push for people with fairer skin. People with lighter skin tones are preferred over people with darker skin tones. Mahati says, “It’s ridiculous, we have fairness creams, and, in the ads, you can see what they are looking for: fair, tall, etc.” She also recalls

Why do you think the caste system is still important in marriage?

the different view her cousins had compared to her and her brother. “One of my cousins married a darker man and her daughter was darker and she was so upset that her baby was darker...it’s upsetting.”

With over 3,000 castes and some 25,000 sub-castes,

navigating through India’s **matrimonial** complexities might seem difficult.

Marriage advertisements are very popular in India. India’s historical ties to the caste system are ever present in printed ads as well as in Indian online matrimonial searches.

Four years ago, Mahati moved to the United States to pursue her Ph.D. in Education. Because India does not offer a doctorate level degree in education, her goals had to be pursued **abroad**. “My background is completely in math. It was only in the U.S. that I would be allowed to shift from a math to an education focus.”

Mahati plans to return to India after graduating. Her goal is to become an educational

researcher in India. She hopes that her research will help improve the education system in India.

Indian cultural history is full of examples of this matrimonial control. “I mostly see subtle differences in marriage traditions amongst the different castes, but I don’t think this should be **criteria** for marriage.” Regardless, the culture of arranged marriages remains common and continues to cast shadows of a caste system that, at least in part, remains a significant part of India’s culture.

