

Caste, Ethnicity and Social Stratification in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: Implications for Matrimonial Decisions

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is an important social institution in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, and is influenced by cultural traditions, caste (biradari), ethnic identity, family values, and socioeconomic status. Although education, urbanization, and modernization have introduced new perspectives, traditional customs continue to play a major role in spouse selection. This study explores the influence of caste, ethnicity, and social stratification on marriage decisions and examines how these factors affect individual choice and family involvement. A qualitative exploratory research design was used, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 purposively selected participants, including parents, young adults, religious scholars, community elders, marriage mediators, and sociologists. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that caste, family honor, ethnic identity, and social status remain important factors in marriage decisions, while education, occupation, financial stability, and personal compatibility are becoming increasingly important among younger generations. The study concludes that marriage practices in KP reflect a combination of traditional values and modern influences and recommends promoting gender equality, informed decision-making, and greater individual participation in spouse selection.

Keywords: sociologists, traditional, Pakhtunkhwa, urbanization, modernization

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is one of the oldest and most universal social institutions, serving as the foundation of family life and social organization across cultures. Beyond its biological and legal dimensions, marriage is a complex social process shaped by cultural traditions, religious beliefs, economic considerations, and social norms (Parsons, 1951; Giddens & Sutton, 2021). In many societies, the selection of a marriage partner is not solely an individual decision but a collective family affair influenced by broader social structures. In Pakistan, particularly in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), matrimonial decisions are deeply embedded in the social fabric, where caste, ethnicity, tribal affiliation, and socioeconomic status significantly influence the choice of a spouse (Shah, 2014; Ahmed, 1980). These factors continue to shape marital practices despite rapid social transformation brought about by education, urbanization, globalization and technological advancement (Fazi & Mehmood, 2016).

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is a culturally rich and socially diverse province characterized by multiple ethnic communities, including Pashtuns, Hindkowans, Gujjars, Kohistanis, Chitralis, and several smaller linguistic and tribal groups (Ahmed, 1980). Among these communities, social identity is strongly associated with ethnicity, tribe, clan and *biradari* (kinship group) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Werbner, 1990). The province is predominantly inhabited by Pashtuns, whose social life is guided by the traditional code of Pashtunwali,

emphasizing honor (*nang*), respect (*ghairat*), hospitality (*melmastia*) and collective responsibility (Ahmed, 1980; Fazi & Mehmood, 2016). These cultural values significantly shape family relationships and matrimonial decisions, reinforcing the preference for marriages within the same tribe, clan, or ethnic group (Ahmed, 1980). Such practices are considered essential for preserving family honor, maintaining cultural continuity, and strengthening kinship ties.

Although Islam promotes equality among believers and emphasizes piety and moral character over lineage or social status in marriage, cultural traditions often coexist with religious teachings and sometimes exert a stronger influence on matrimonial practices (Fazi & Mehmood, 2016). In many parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, families continue to prioritize caste compatibility, tribal affiliation, family reputation and social prestige when selecting marriage partners (Ahmed, 1980; Shah, 2014).

The concept of caste in Pakistan differs considerably from the classical Hindu caste system found in neighboring India. Nevertheless, hereditary social groupings based on occupation, ancestry, tribal lineage, and *biradari* continue to function as important markers of social identity (Gazdar, 2007; Shami et al., 1994). These social categories influence interpersonal relationships, political alliances, economic opportunities and marital choices (Gilmartin, 2012). Within Pashtun society, tribal affiliations and clan identities often perform functions similar to caste by regulating marriage patterns and defining social boundaries (Ahmed, 1980). Families generally prefer endogamous marriages, whereby spouses are selected from within the same social group, to preserve lineage, strengthen family solidarity and maintain social status (Shami et al., 1994). Such preferences contribute to the persistence of social stratification and limit opportunities for intergroup interaction.

Ethnicity constitutes another significant determinant of matrimonial decisions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Ethnic identity encompasses shared language, customs, traditions, historical experiences, and cultural practices that distinguish one group from another (Eriksen, 2010). Marriages within the same ethnic community are generally perceived as more stable because they facilitate communication, cultural compatibility, shared religious practices and mutual understanding between families (Ahmed, 1980).

Social stratification further complicates the matrimonial landscape by introducing economic and educational considerations into marriage negotiations. Social stratification refers to the hierarchical organization of society based on wealth, occupation, education, prestige, and power (Weber, 1947; Bourdieu, 1986). In contemporary Pakistani society, socioeconomic status increasingly influences marriage decisions alongside traditional criteria such as caste and ethnicity (Gazdar, 2007). Families often evaluate prospective spouses according to their educational qualifications, employment, income level, property ownership and overall social standing. Educational attainment has become particularly important as expanding access to higher education has transformed expectations regarding marriage compatibility (Shah, 2014). Many educated families now seek spouses with similar academic backgrounds and professional aspirations, reflecting a gradual shift from purely traditional considerations toward merit-based selection.

Despite growing scholarly interest in marriage patterns and social inequality in Pakistan, relatively few studies have examined the combined influence of caste, ethnicity and social stratification on matrimonial decisions within the specific socio-cultural context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Fazi & Mehmood, 2016). Existing research has often focused on individual aspects such as tribal customs, *biradari* networks, or socioeconomic status, while providing limited analysis of how these dimensions intersect to shape marriage choices (Gazdar, 2007; Werbner, 1990). Furthermore, the impact of modernization and changing generational attitudes on traditional matrimonial practices remains insufficiently explored. Addressing this gap is important for understanding contemporary social transformation in the province and for informing policies aimed at promoting social inclusion, gender equality, and intercultural harmony.

This study seeks to examine how caste, ethnicity, and social stratification influence matrimonial decisions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It explores the extent to which traditional social structures continue to shape marriage

preferences while assessing the emerging influence of education, urbanization, and changing social values. By investigating the perspectives of families, young adults, community leaders, and other stakeholders, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the social factors governing marriage in the province. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader sociological literature on family, marriage and social inequality in Pakistan while offering practical insights for policymakers, educators, civil society organizations, and community leaders working to promote equitable and inclusive matrimonial practices.

Statement of the Problem

Marriage in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) is a deeply rooted social institution that extends beyond the personal relationship between two individuals and reflects the cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic structure of society. Although significant progress has been made in education, urbanization, economic development, and access to information, matrimonial decisions in many parts of the province continue to be strongly influenced by caste (*biradari*), tribal affiliation, ethnicity, family reputation, and social status. These traditional considerations often take precedence over individual preferences, compatibility, educational achievements and personal aspirations. Consequently, many individuals, particularly women and young adults, have limited autonomy in choosing their life partners, while inter-caste and inter-ethnic marriages frequently face social resistance, family opposition, and community disapproval.

The persistence of caste- and ethnicity-based matrimonial practices reinforces social stratification by maintaining existing social hierarchies, restricting social mobility, and perpetuating discrimination among different communities. While modernization has introduced changing attitudes toward marriage, the extent to which these transformations have weakened traditional social barriers remains insufficiently understood. Existing studies in Pakistan have largely examined marriage patterns, tribal customs, or *biradari* systems independently, with limited attention to the combined influence of caste, ethnicity, and social stratification on matrimonial decision-making, particularly within the unique sociocultural context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This lack of comprehensive empirical evidence creates a significant research gap. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate how these interconnected social factors influence matrimonial decisions in KP and to assess whether contemporary social changes are reshaping traditional marriage practices among different communities.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the influence of caste on matrimonial decisions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
2. To investigate the role of ethnicity in marriage selection.
3. To analyze how social stratification affects family preferences in matrimonial arrangements.

Research Questions

1. How does caste influence matrimonial decisions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?
2. What role does ethnicity play in marriage selection?
3. How does social stratification affect marriage preferences?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it provides a comprehensive understanding of how caste, ethnicity, and social stratification influence matrimonial decisions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), where marriage remains closely

linked to cultural traditions, tribal affiliations, and family values. Despite the growing impact of education, urbanization and globalization, traditional social structures continue to shape marriage preferences and family decision-making. By examining these interconnected factors, the study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on marriage, social inequality and family dynamics in Pakistan.

The findings of this research will be valuable for academics, sociologists, policymakers, educators, and social development organizations seeking to understand the persistence of caste- and ethnicity-based practices in contemporary society. The study will also provide empirical evidence that can support initiatives aimed at promoting social inclusion, reducing discrimination, and encouraging equal opportunities in matrimonial choices. Furthermore, it will help community leaders and religious scholars understand the evolving attitudes of younger generations toward marriage and the challenges associated with balancing cultural traditions and individual preferences.

In addition, this research will serve as a reference for future studies on marriage patterns, social mobility, gender relations, and ethnic diversity in Pakistan. By identifying the social and cultural factors that shape matrimonial decisions, the study offers practical insights for developing awareness programs and policies that foster greater social cohesion, gender equity and intercultural understanding while respecting the cultural values and traditions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Marriage is a universal social institution that reflects the cultural, economic, religious, and political organization of society (Parsons, 1951; Giddens & Sutton, 2021). In South Asian societies, particularly Pakistan, marriage extends beyond the union of two individuals and represents an alliance between families, kinship groups, tribes and communities (Shah, 2014; Werbner, 2015). Consequently, matrimonial decisions are influenced not only by personal preferences but also by social norms, family expectations, caste affiliations, ethnic identity, and socioeconomic status (Shah, 2014). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), where tribal traditions and collective family structures remain influential, these factors continue to shape the process of spouse selection despite rapid socioeconomic transformations (Ahmed, 1980; Fazi & Mehmood, 2024).

Marriage as a Social Institution

Marriage has been extensively studied by sociologists and anthropologists because of its central role in maintaining social order and cultural continuity. Parsons (1951) argued that marriage performs essential social functions, including reproduction, socialization of children, regulation of sexual behavior, and preservation of cultural values. From a structural-functionalist perspective, marriage contributes to social stability by strengthening family institutions and ensuring continuity between generations.

In Pakistan, marriage is generally viewed as a family-centered institution rather than an individual choice. Families actively participate in selecting spouses to ensure compatibility in terms of religion, family background, social status, education and economic position (Shah, 2014; Werbner, 2015). Such practices reflect collectivist cultural values, where family honor and community acceptance often outweigh individual preferences. Previous studies indicate that arranged marriages remain the dominant form of marriage in Pakistan, although the influence of individual choice has gradually increased among educated urban populations (Shah, 2014).

Marriage also functions as a mechanism for preserving social identity. Families frequently prefer spouses from similar cultural and social backgrounds to minimize conflicts arising from differences in language, customs, traditions and expectations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Concept of Caste and Biradari in Pakistan

Unlike the classical Hindu caste system, Pakistan does not possess a constitutionally or religiously sanctioned caste hierarchy. Nevertheless, hereditary social groupings commonly referred to as *biradari*, clan, tribe, or caste continue to influence social interaction, political alliances, economic opportunities, and marriage decisions (Werbner, 2015; Gazdar, 2007).

The concept of *biradari* represents an extended kinship network based upon common ancestry. Membership in a *biradari* provides social security, mutual assistance, political support, and collective identity (Werbner, 2015). Families often rely upon these networks during marriage negotiations because they offer trust, familiarity and cultural compatibility. As a result, endogamous marriages within the same *biradari* remain highly preferred (Shami et al., 1994).

Although Islamic teachings emphasize equality among believers regardless of lineage or ancestry, cultural traditions have continued to shape matrimonial preferences throughout South Asia (Fazi & Mehmood, 2024). In many Pakistani communities, marriages outside one's *biradari* or tribal group are viewed with skepticism because they are believed to threaten family prestige, inheritance arrangements, and social cohesion.

Recent research conducted in rural Punjab found that caste and kinship affiliations continue to exert a significant influence on marriage decisions even after accounting for education and income, illustrating the persistence of traditional norms alongside modernization.

Ethnicity and Tribal Identity in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Ethnicity refers to a shared sense of identity based on common language, history, culture, traditions, and ancestry (Eriksen, 2010). Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is one of Pakistan's most ethnically diverse provinces, although Pashtuns constitute the majority population (Ahmed, 1980).

Among Pashtuns, tribal identity remains closely connected with social organization through the traditional code of Pashtunwali. This indigenous value system emphasizes honor (*nang*), hospitality (*melmastia*), courage, loyalty and protection of family dignity (Ahmed, 1980; Fazi & Mehmood, 2024). These cultural principles significantly influence matrimonial decisions by encouraging marriages within the same tribe or closely related clans.

Ethnic endogamy is often preferred because it promotes linguistic compatibility, shared customs, similar religious practices, and mutual understanding between families (Ahmed, 1980). Parents generally perceive marriages within the same ethnic community as more stable because both families possess comparable cultural expectations regarding gender roles, inheritance, family obligations, and social behavior.

Social Stratification

Social stratification refers to the hierarchical arrangement of individuals and groups according to wealth, education, occupation, prestige, and political power (Weber, 1947). Max Weber identified class, status, and power as three interrelated dimensions that determine an individual's social position, while Pierre Bourdieu emphasized the importance of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital in reproducing inequality (Bourdieu, 1986).

In Pakistan, social stratification is shaped by multiple factors, including land ownership, occupation, educational attainment, income, political influence, kinship networks, and family reputation (Gazdar, 2007). These indicators significantly affect marriage negotiations because families seek spouses possessing comparable socioeconomic status.

Educational attainment has become an increasingly important indicator of social status during the past two decades. Highly educated families frequently seek spouses with similar educational qualifications because education symbolizes economic security, social mobility and intellectual compatibility (Shah, 2014).

Matrimonial Decision-Making in Pakistani Society

Marriage decisions in Pakistan are generally collective rather than individual (Shah, 2014). Parents, grandparents, uncles, and other senior family members actively participate in evaluating potential spouses. Their decisions are influenced by multiple criteria, including religious compatibility, family reputation, educational background, occupation, financial stability and kinship ties.

Existing studies suggest that family honor remains one of the strongest determinants of marriage selection (Ahmed, 1980; Werbner, 2015). Families often fear that marriages outside accepted social boundaries may reduce their social prestige or weaken long-standing kinship alliances. Consequently, many marriage proposals are evaluated according to family background rather than individual personality.

Research Gap

Although numerous studies have examined marriage practices, caste systems, ethnic identities, and social stratification in Pakistan, limited research has explored the combined influence of these factors on matrimonial decision-making in the specific context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Existing studies have primarily focused on individual aspects such as *biradari* networks, tribal traditions, gender roles, or socioeconomic status, without providing a comprehensive analysis of how caste, ethnicity and social stratification collectively shape marriage preferences and family decisions. Furthermore, most previous research has been conducted in Punjab or at the national level, with comparatively little empirical attention given to the unique sociocultural dynamics of KP, where tribal affiliations and ethnic identities play a significant role in everyday life. Additionally, the impact of modernization, higher education, urbanization, and changing attitudes among younger generations toward traditional matrimonial practices remains insufficiently investigated. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the interconnected effects of caste, ethnicity and social stratification on matrimonial decisions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, thereby contributing context-specific empirical evidence to the existing literature and informing future research and policy development.

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Structural Functionalism Theory (Parsons, 1951), which together explain how social identity and societal institutions influence matrimonial decisions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP).

Social Identity Theory argues that individuals derive their identity and sense of belonging from membership in social groups such as caste, ethnicity, tribe and *biradari*. Consequently, families often prefer marriages within their own social group to preserve cultural identity, family honor, and social acceptance. This theory helps explain the continued preference for endogamous marriages in KP.

Structural Functionalism Theory views marriage as a vital social institution that promotes social order, cultural continuity, and family stability. It explains that families support marriages within the same caste, tribe, or ethnic group to strengthen kinship ties, protect inheritance and maintain established social norms. Together, these theories provide a suitable framework for understanding how caste, ethnicity and social stratification shape matrimonial decisions despite the influences of modernization and education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate the influence of caste, ethnicity, and social stratification on matrimonial decisions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, cultural beliefs and social practices related to marriage. The exploratory design is suitable for examining a phenomenon that has received limited empirical attention within the context of KP. It enables the researcher to explore complex social interactions and cultural norms through detailed narratives, providing rich insights into how traditional values and contemporary social changes shape matrimonial decision-making.

Nature of the Research

This study is exploratory and qualitative in nature. It seeks to explore and understand the influence of caste, ethnicity and social stratification on matrimonial decisions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Rather than measuring variables quantitatively, the study focuses on participants' experiences, perceptions, and cultural beliefs. The qualitative nature of the research enables an in-depth understanding of social realities and provides comprehensive insights into the cultural and societal factors influencing marriage decisions.

Data Collection Tools

Data for this study will be collected through semi-structured interviews using a researcher-developed interview guide. This tool allows participants to share their views and experiences freely while ensuring that all key research themes are addressed. The interview guide will include open-ended questions focusing on caste, ethnicity, social stratification, family preferences, and matrimonial decision-making in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process will begin after obtaining approval from the relevant authorities and informed consent from all participants. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted individually at mutually convenient locations or through online platforms where necessary. Each interview will follow a prepared interview guide while allowing participants to express their views freely. With participants' permission, interviews will be audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes. The collected data will then be transcribed, organized, and prepared for thematic analysis.

Targeted Respondents

The study will target 30 respondents selected through purposive sampling from different social groups in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The participants will include parents, unmarried young adults, religious scholars, community elders, marriage mediators, and sociologists/educationists. These respondents are expected to possess relevant knowledge and experiences regarding caste, ethnicity, social stratification, and matrimonial decision-making, enabling the researcher to obtain diverse perspectives and comprehensive qualitative data relevant to the objectives of the study.

S. No.	Category of Respondents	Purpose of Selection	Proposed Number
1	Parents	To understand family preferences and decision-making in marriage	8
2	Unmarried Young Adults	To explore perceptions and preferences regarding matrimonial decisions	8

3	Religious Scholars	To examine religious perspectives on caste, ethnicity, and marriage	4
4	Community Elders	To understand traditional customs and cultural practices influencing marriage	4
5	Marriage Mediators (Matchmakers)	To gain insights into prevailing matrimonial trends and selection criteria	3
6	Sociologists/Educationists	To provide expert opinions on social stratification and changing marriage patterns	3
Total	Targeted Respondents		30

Data Analysis Technique

The collected qualitative data will be analyzed using thematic analysis. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher will carefully read the transcripts to become familiar with the data. Relevant information will be coded and grouped into meaningful categories based on recurring ideas and patterns. These categories will then be developed into themes related to caste, ethnicity, social stratification, and matrimonial decision-making. The identified themes will be interpreted in light of the research objectives and the selected theoretical framework to draw meaningful conclusions.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data collected to explore the influence of caste, ethnicity, and social stratification on matrimonial decisions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). The data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 30 purposively selected respondents, including parents, unmarried young adults, religious scholars, community elders, marriage mediators, and sociologists/educationists. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. This analytical approach enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns, ideas and experiences shared by the participants. The themes presented in this chapter are directly aligned with the research objectives and questions.

Profile of the Respondents

The respondents represented diverse social groups to ensure a comprehensive understanding of matrimonial decision-making in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Respondent Category	Number
Parents	8
Unmarried Young Adults	8
Religious Scholars	4
Community Elders	4
Marriage Mediators	3
Sociologists/Educationists	3
Total	30

The diversity of respondents enabled the researcher to explore matrimonial decisions from cultural, religious, educational, and social perspectives.

Caste (Biradari) as a Determining Factor in Matrimonial Decisions

One of the most dominant themes emerging from the interviews was the continued importance of caste (*biradari*) in selecting a marriage partner. The majority of parents and community elders indicated that marriages within the same *biradari* are preferred because they preserve family honor, strengthen kinship ties, and maintain social identity. Respondents explained that families feel more secure when the prospective bride or groom belongs to a familiar social background, as shared customs and traditions reduce the likelihood of future conflicts.

Several respondents stated that *biradari* continues to function as an informal social institution that regulates matrimonial relationships. Parents reported that they often reject marriage proposals from outside their caste even when the prospective spouse is highly educated and financially stable. This demonstrates that traditional social identity remains a significant consideration in marriage negotiations.

One parent (R4) remarked: "Our first preference is always our own *biradari*. It keeps our family traditions alive and ensures mutual understanding between both families."

Similarly, a community elder (R17) observed: "People believe that marriage within the same caste protects family respect and strengthens relationships among relatives."

However, younger participants expressed relatively different opinions. Many educated respondents acknowledged that while *biradari* remains important, personal compatibility, education, and mutual understanding should receive greater consideration. Some participants suggested that rigid adherence to caste has become less relevant in urban areas where educational and professional interactions have increased.

Overall, the findings indicate that although modernization has influenced younger generations, caste continues to play a decisive role in matrimonial decision-making, particularly in rural communities.

Ethnicity and Tribal Identity

Another significant finding relates to the influence of ethnicity and tribal affiliation on marriage selection. Most respondents emphasized that families prefer marriages within the same ethnic group because common language, customs, religious practices, and cultural values facilitate marital adjustment and family harmony.

Among Pashtun respondents, tribal identity was frequently mentioned as an important criterion during marriage negotiations. Participants explained that marriages within the same tribe strengthen social cohesion and preserve traditional customs. Respondents also highlighted that families often seek spouses from communities sharing similar cultural values to avoid misunderstandings after marriage.

A religious scholar (R10) commented: "Islam does not differentiate between people on the basis of tribe or caste, but cultural traditions still influence families when choosing marriage partners."

Likewise, a marriage mediator (R22) stated: "Families usually ask about tribe and ethnic background before discussing education or financial status."

Participants belonging to minority ethnic communities expressed similar preferences. They believed that shared language and traditions help couples adapt more easily to married life. Nevertheless, some educated respondents argued that ethnic compatibility should not outweigh moral character and mutual respect.

The findings suggest that ethnic identity remains an influential determinant of matrimonial decisions, although its significance appears to be gradually declining among educated urban populations.

Social Stratification and Socioeconomic Status

The interviews revealed that social stratification significantly shapes marriage preferences in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Respondents consistently reported that families consider educational attainment, occupation, income level, property ownership, and social reputation before accepting a marriage proposal.

Parents explained that financial stability is viewed as an important indicator of a successful marriage because it ensures economic security for the couple. Similarly, educational compatibility was frequently mentioned as a desirable characteristic, particularly among urban families. Many respondents believed that spouses with similar educational backgrounds are more likely to share common aspirations and communicate effectively.

One parent (R6) stated: "Today, education is almost as important as family background. We prefer a well-educated and respectable family."

A sociologist (R28) observed: "Traditional factors such as caste remain influential, but education and professional status have become increasingly important among the younger generation."

Some respondents noted that economic inequality often discourages marriages between families belonging to different social classes. Families from higher socioeconomic backgrounds generally prefer alliances with households of comparable financial standing to maintain their social prestige and lifestyle.

However, several young participants argued that moral values, personal compatibility, and mutual understanding should be given greater importance than wealth or social class. They believed that excessive emphasis on socioeconomic status may delay marriages and contribute to unnecessary discrimination.

The findings indicate that while caste and ethnicity continue to influence matrimonial decisions, socioeconomic status has emerged as an equally important factor in contemporary marriage negotiations. Education, occupation, and financial stability increasingly complement traditional cultural considerations, particularly in urban areas experiencing rapid social change.

Family Influence and Cultural Norms

The findings revealed that family members, particularly parents and elders, play a decisive role in matrimonial decisions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Most respondents stated that marriage is regarded as a family matter rather than an individual choice. Parents are actively involved in searching for suitable proposals, evaluating prospective families, and making the final decision regarding marriage. Participants explained that family approval is considered essential because marriage establishes long-term relationships between two families rather than merely between two individuals.

Many respondents emphasized that cultural values, family reputation, and social acceptance strongly influence parental decisions. Families often assess the moral character, social standing, and background of the prospective bride or groom before considering education or personal compatibility. Community elders noted that marriage within familiar social networks strengthens trust and minimizes the possibility of future disputes.

One respondent (R12) stated: "Parents know the traditions of the family and therefore believe they can make better decisions than young people."

Similarly, another participant (R19) remarked: "Marriage is not only about two individuals; it is about maintaining relationships between two respected families."

Several young respondents acknowledged the importance of parental guidance but expressed a desire for greater participation in selecting their life partners. They believed that mutual understanding and personal compatibility should complement family preferences rather than be overlooked. Despite these changing attitudes, most participants agreed that parental consent remains an indispensable element of marriage in KP.

The findings suggest that family authority continues to dominate matrimonial decision-making. Cultural traditions emphasizing collective responsibility, family honor, and kinship solidarity remain deeply embedded within the social structure of the province.

Gender and Matrimonial Decision-Making

Gender emerged as another important theme during the interviews. Most respondents agreed that women generally experience less autonomy than men in selecting their spouses. Parents and community elders acknowledged that daughters' marriages are often arranged after extensive consultation among family members, while sons usually enjoy relatively greater freedom to express their preferences.

Female respondents indicated that concerns regarding family honor, cultural expectations, and community reputation significantly influence matrimonial decisions. Many participants explained that families often prioritize social acceptance over individual preferences, particularly in rural areas where traditional norms remain strong.

One female respondent (R8) observed: "Girls are usually expected to accept the decision of their parents because family honor is considered more important than personal choice."

A religious scholar (R11) commented: "Islam encourages consultation and mutual consent in marriage, but cultural traditions sometimes limit women's participation in decision-making."

Educated participants emphasized that increasing female education has improved women's awareness of their rights and increased their involvement in marriage decisions. Nevertheless, respondents acknowledged that complete autonomy in spouse selection remains limited in many communities.

Overall, the findings indicate that gender inequalities continue to influence matrimonial decisions, although gradual social change is creating greater opportunities for women's participation in the marriage process.

Modernization, Education and Changing Attitudes

The interviews revealed significant changes in societal attitudes toward marriage due to modernization, education, urbanization, and technological advancement. Younger respondents consistently emphasized that education, personality, mutual respect, and emotional compatibility are becoming increasingly important in selecting a marriage partner.

Participants noted that higher education has broadened social interaction across caste and ethnic boundaries, reducing prejudice among educated individuals. Social media, universities, and workplaces have created opportunities for interaction with people from diverse backgrounds, contributing to more flexible attitudes toward marriage.

One university graduate (R24) stated: "Education teaches us that character and understanding are more important than caste or tribe."

Similarly, another respondent (R26) explained: "Urban families are becoming more open-minded. They still respect traditions, but education has changed many attitudes."

However, respondents also recognized that modernization has not completely replaced traditional values. Most participants agreed that although younger generations may prefer compatibility-based marriages, parental approval, family reputation, and cultural expectations continue to influence the final decision.

The findings demonstrate that modernization has introduced gradual social transformation rather than complete cultural change. Traditional values coexist with emerging perspectives, creating a balance between collective family interests and individual aspirations.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study reveal that caste, ethnicity, and social stratification continue to play a significant role in shaping matrimonial decisions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa despite the growing influence of education, urbanization, and modernization. The analysis indicates that caste (*biradari*) remains one of the primary considerations during spouse selection, as families prefer marriages within the same social group to preserve family honor, strengthen kinship ties, and maintain cultural traditions. Similarly, ethnic and tribal identity strongly influences marriage preferences, with families favoring partners who share the same language, customs, and cultural values to ensure compatibility and social acceptance.

The study also found that social stratification, including educational qualifications, occupation, income, and family reputation, has become increasingly important in matrimonial negotiations. While traditional criteria continue to dominate, many educated families now consider education and financial stability as essential factors for a successful marriage. Furthermore, the findings highlight the decisive role of parents and elders, who remain the primary decision-makers in marriage arrangements, reflecting the collectivist nature of society in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The analysis further reveals that gender disparities persist, with women generally having less autonomy than men in selecting their life partners. However, increased access to education has improved women's participation in matrimonial decision-making. Finally, the study demonstrates that modernization and higher education are gradually transforming traditional marriage practices. Younger generations increasingly value personal compatibility, mutual respect, and educational equality over rigid caste and ethnic boundaries. Nevertheless, cultural traditions and family approval continue to play a dominant role. Overall, the findings suggest that matrimonial decisions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa represent a balance between enduring traditional values and emerging modern perspectives, reflecting a gradual process of social transformation rather than a complete departure from established cultural norms.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of caste, ethnicity, and social stratification on matrimonial decisions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and found that these factors continue to play a significant role in shaping marriage preferences despite the ongoing effects of modernization, education, and urbanization. The findings reveal that families generally prefer marriages within the same caste (*biradari*), tribe, or ethnic group to preserve family honor, cultural identity, and kinship ties. In addition to these traditional considerations, socioeconomic factors such as education, occupation, financial stability, and family reputation have become increasingly important in the marriage selection process.

The study also highlights the central role of parents and elders in matrimonial decision-making, reflecting the collectivist nature of society in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Although younger generations increasingly value personal compatibility, mutual respect, and educational equality, family approval remains a decisive factor. Furthermore, the findings indicate that women continue to experience comparatively limited autonomy in selecting their life partners, although educational advancement is gradually enhancing their participation in marriage decisions.

Overall, the study concludes that matrimonial practices in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa represent a combination of enduring cultural traditions and emerging modern values. Promoting education, social awareness, gender equality, and intercultural understanding can help reduce discriminatory practices while preserving the positive aspects of the province's cultural and social heritage.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research should expand the scope of this study by including larger and more diverse samples from all districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and other provinces of Pakistan to enable broader comparisons. Comparative studies between rural and urban communities, as well as among different ethnic groups, would provide a deeper understanding of changing matrimonial practices. Researchers are also encouraged to adopt mixed-methods or quantitative approaches to complement qualitative findings and improve generalizability. Further studies should examine the influence of social media, globalization, migration and higher education on contemporary marriage preferences. Additionally, greater attention should be given to women's decision-making autonomy, inter-caste and inter-ethnic marriages, and the role of religious teachings in shaping matrimonial choices. Longitudinal studies may also help assess how societal attitudes evolve over time. Such research will contribute to the development of evidence-based policies and community initiatives that promote social inclusion, gender equality and informed matrimonial decision-making while respecting the cultural values of Pakistani society.

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