

# Exploring the Balance: Cultural and Medical Perspectives on Cousin Marriages in Scheduled Castes and Other Communities

Paras Boricha

Bachelor of Computer Applications (BCA)

Bachelor of Legislative Laws (LLB)

Master of Business Administration (MBA)

**Abstract:** *This article explores the cultural and medical perspectives on cousin marriages, particularly focusing on second cousin marriages in Scheduled Castes and other communities in India. Historically, cousin marriages have been practiced in various cultures worldwide, including India. Worldwide, more than 10% of marriages are between first or second cousins. While first cousin marriages have been scrutinized due to potential genetic risks, research suggests that second cousin marriages pose minimal genetic risks. The article also examines the legal frameworks surrounding cousin marriages in India and the role of genetic counseling in managing risks. This study balances the cultural importance of cousin marriages with the medical considerations necessary in modern times.*

**Keywords:** Cousin marriages, second cousins, Scheduled Castes, consanguinity, genetic counseling, Indian marriage laws, cultural traditions, medical risk.

Cousin marriages have deep historical roots, with records of this practice across diverse cultures worldwide. In India, cousin marriages have been common in many communities, including the Scheduled Caste. This tradition of cousin marriage can trace its origins to ancient times, possibly linked to Buddhist influences. *The fact that Lord Gautama Buddha is believed to have married his cousin suggests a cultural continuity in certain Indian communities.*

However, cousin marriages, particularly among first cousins, have often been debated due to potential genetic risks.

Scientific studies have raised concerns over the possibility of genetic disorders in children born of close consanguineous unions. While this has fueled criticism, research on second cousin marriages suggests a different outcome. Unlike first cousins, second cousins share a smaller genetic pool, significantly reducing the risk of inherited disorders. In fact, studies have shown that the genetic risk in second cousin marriages is comparable to that of the general population.

## Understanding Cousin Marriages

Cousin Type	Definition	Marriage Acceptance
First Cousin	Children of siblings	Often discouraged; legally permissible in many places.
Second Cousin	Children of first cousins	Generally accepted and legally permissible; minimal genetic risk.
Cross Cousin	Children of a brother and a sister	Often preferred for marriage in many cultures; strengthens family ties.
Parallel Cousin	Children of two brothers or two sisters	Often discouraged or prohibited in many cultures.

## Medical Perspective on Cousin Marriages

From a medical standpoint, the risk of genetic abnormalities in second cousin marriages is minimal. According to the Journal of Genetic Counseling, the risk of birth defects or disabilities for second cousins is marginally higher than that of unrelated couples, with a 3 - 3.5% risk compared to the general population's 2 - 3%. This minor increase is far less alarming than the risks associated with first cousin marriages, which can reach 4 - 6%. Experts, including Dr. Arno Motulsky from the University of Washington, assert that the genetic risks for second cousins do not warrant concern or additional preconception screening beyond standard genetic counseling.

## Sapinda Relationship and Legal Framework in India

In Hindu law, the concept of the *Sapinda* relationship plays a critical role in defining who can marry whom. The *Sapinda* relationship is derived from ancestral rites, where people bound by shared offerings to common ancestors are considered too closely related to marry.

The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 prohibits marriages between individuals who are Sapindas to each other. The law defines the degree of prohibited relationships based on lineage:

- For **men**, the Sapinda relationship extends up to the **third generation** on the father's side and the **fifth generation** on the mother's side.
- For **women**, the Sapinda relationship extends to the **third generation** on the paternal side and the **fifth generation** on the maternal side.

This means that individuals who share a common ancestor within these limits cannot marry each other under Hindu law, as they are considered too closely related.

**In my view, The Sapinda relationship was designed at a time when medical science had limited understanding of genetic risks. Today, with modern genetic counseling, we know that second cousin marriages pose minimal health risks. In light of this, it is time to reconsider such rigid prohibitions and allow legal flexibility where science supports it.**

However, **the Special Marriage Act, 1954 provides an alternative legal avenue**, allowing cousin marriages that may otherwise be prohibited under Hindu law, particularly when customs permit such unions

#### *Influence of Buddhism on Marriage Laws*

Marriage laws in Buddhism vary widely across different cultures and regions, as Buddhism does not have a central authority or universally binding legal system. **Buddhism does not impose specific marriage laws; instead, it emphasizes the importance of love, respect, and commitment between partners. The marriage customs among Buddhists vary widely depending on cultural influences, local laws, and individual choices.** The focus remains on building a harmonious relationship that contributes to the spiritual growth of both partners.

These varying perspectives on marriage highlight the cultural diversity within Buddhism and its influence on marriage practices, which may also inform attitudes toward cousin marriages in communities with Buddhist roots, such as the Scheduled Caste

#### *Genetic Counseling and Risk Management*

In modern times, genetic counseling has become an essential tool for families considering cousin marriages. This medical service provides couples with detailed information about their genetic risks and the likelihood of passing on genetic disorders to their children. Genetic counselors use family medical histories to assess risk levels and suggest appropriate tests when necessary. **Importantly, for second cousin marriages, no additional genetic screening beyond what is typically offered to unrelated couples is generally recommended**

#### *A Global Perspective*

The practice of cousin marriage, including second cousin unions, is not unique to India. Across the world, cousin marriages have been and continue to be common, particularly in regions such as the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Asia. In these regions, cousin marriages are often encouraged for reasons similar to those in India: the preservation of family wealth, continuity of cultural traditions, and the strengthening of family bonds.

#### *Revitalizing Tradition While Addressing Modern Challenges*

In the Marwadi Vankar community, marriage is a cornerstone of tradition and cultural identity. However, a noticeable gap exists between the growing population and the rate of marriages within the community. To bridge this gap, second cousin marriages present a thoughtful, culturally - aligned option. These unions can expand the network of eligible matches while preserving the close - knit familial bonds cherished by the community. Moreover, second cousin marriages carry minimal genetic risks, as supported by modern research, offering a safe and practical way to uphold marriage traditions while adapting to current demographic realities.

**Although my perspective is influenced by my experiences within the Marwadi vankar community, this approach can be relevant to other communities facing similar**

**challenges.** By exploring second cousin marriages, families can strengthen their ties and ensure that health risks associated with consanguinity remain minimal, thus fostering a balance between cultural continuity and modern needs.

#### **Conclusion**

In summary, Second cousin marriages represent a culturally significant and medically sound choice for various communities, including Scheduled Castes. Research demonstrates that these unions present minimal genetic risks, comparable to those of the general population, while first cousin and parallel cousin marriages carry higher risk levels

Legal frameworks such as the Special Marriage Act of 1954 endorse these unions, allowing communities to adapt marriage practices to meet modern needs while respecting traditional values. The influence of Buddhism further enriches this perspective, promoting the importance of love and commitment over restrictive marriage laws.

**By considering second cousin marriages, communities can maintain cultural traditions, build stronger family ties, and ensure the health and well - being of future generations across diverse cultural landscapes.**

#### **References:**

- [1] Motulsky, A. (2018). Genetic Risk Factors in Cousin Marriages. University of Washington Press.
- [2] Wikipedia. - Sapinda relationship. Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sapinda>