



Confronting Cultures: A Case of Changing Patterns of Marriage in Bishnupriya Manipuri Society

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ABSTRACT

Marriage and family are not just personal realities but also social realities, and therefore they are subject matter for study by sociologists. The present paper attempts to study the patterns and changes in marriage and in the process examine the factors that influence the practice of marriage in Bishnupriya Manipuri society which is recognized as linguistic minority group and a closed exogamous society.

The data is collected from unstructured personal interviews taken from priests, teachers, housewives, event managers, and unmarried educated youths from Bhakatpur village who are purposively selected.

The study reveals that the influences of majority culture (Bengali) in their marriage practices. The impact of education and media is reflected in the mounting say of the girls in the determining their partners in their marriage. But at the same time the study also reveals the poor overall status of education particularly of the girls; consequently the study confirms the prevalence of spousal education and age difference.

KEYWORDS

Marriage; Culture; Bishnupriya Manipuri; Dowry.

Almost all identified human societies have a structure to recognise the social union of their men and women that enable them to reproduce which we term as marriage. Therefore, marriage and family are not just personal realities but also social realities, and therefore they are subject matter for study by sociologists. The study of marriage in a society reveals the status and role of both men and women in that society. Thus the present paper attempts to study the patterns and changes in marriage and in the process examine the factors that influence the practice of marriage in Bishnupriya Manipuri society which is recognized as a closed exogamous society.

The data is collected from unstructured personal interviews taken from priests (3), teachers (3), housewives (4), event (marriage) manager (1), and unmarried educated youths (5), from Bhakatpur village who are purposively selected. The tools for data collection are field notes and voice recorder.

The Bishnupriya Manipuri community which is a linguistic minority are found in the North eastern parts of India and in Bangladesh. Governed by typical patriarchal values, marriage in Bishnupriya Manipuri society is characterised by monogamy, community and caste endogamy, clan (gotra) exogamy, prohibition of divorce and patrilineal system of inheritance.

The ritual and the institution of marriage also reveal the status of women in that society. Indicators as timings of marriage, spousal age and educational differences, dowry, and the extent to which women have a say in determining timing and partner, plays an imperative role in determining the status of women.

The institution of marriage in Bishnupriya society is based on the Hindu patterns where, bridegroom's family first went to see the bride (Koina Chana) and fixed the date of marriage after consulting (shok) the kundali of both the spouses, and then the date is fixed in a ritual called waroupoth. Following which engagement (Heiching) takes place by devoting bhog to the family deity Apokpa. Following which the marriage (Lohang) is executed. Most of the rituals practiced by the Bishnupriya Manipuri community have a clear resemblance with that of the Meitei community, with whom they had a long historical relation, even names of the rituals as Waroupoth, Heiching, Apokpa, Lohang also sounds similar.

Though most of the rituals practiced in Bishnupriya society

are the traditional ones but over the years one can observe many new elements in Bishnupriya marriages which is mostly influenced by the neighbouring Bengali culture. As the practice of wearing the traditional bangle and vermilion (Shakha and Sindoor), blouse for the bride, dhoti, kurta and sandal for the groom, offering fish to the guests in the marriage party, preparing tents for the guests and kunjia where marriage takes place. Moreover earlier according to the traditional norms all the guests had to wait to take the food (dinner) until entire rituals of the marriage is over but now having food and the performance of the rituals continue simultaneously. To add to it a party in the house of the groom after the marriage is also a new practice which again taken from Bengali culture (which they call chothurthamangal).

All the traditional rituals have some meaning and are there for some reason which unfortunately the people hardly understand.

- Priest

With time we have to evolve and see if it is applicable, mere following like a bunch of cattle don't make sense. (Referring to the ritual of having food after the marriage).

- Unmarried educated youth.

Though arranged marriage continues to characterize marriage in general in Bishnupriya society which is arranged either by parents alone or with relatives and matchmakers. But there is significant shift these days to the preference for love marriages too. Couples these days also opt for elopement to establish their say in determining their partner. If the couple have followed clan (gotra) exogamy, there is a social ritual (Chamoni) that gives social recognition to that marriage. But inter caste and inter community marriages and clan (gotra) endogamy are strictly prohibited.

- *The luxury for selection of life partner is mostly limited to educated women.*
- **Teacher**
- *Marriage within the community is an attempt to keep our blood clean not mixed which may lead to loss of our identity.*
- **Event Manager**
- *Our race and culture (Bishnupriya) is one of the purest in the country today.*
- **Teacher**

In the present study there is hardly any existence of child mar-

riage, rather increase in marital age and a significant difference in spousal age is confirmed by the respondents. Moreover the difference in spousal age falls significantly in cases of love marriages.

- Longer search for suitable (well earned) husband who are limited leads to women wait more to get married.

-Housewife

- Increase in population leads to excess supply of women of marriageable ages.

-Priest

- Increases in marital age may be attributed to shifts in the education of boys and girls

-Teacher

Most of the love affairs start at colleges where students are of almost similar age group.

• *Unmarried educated youth*

In a typical patriarchal kinship structure particularly among the Hindus, marriage is regarded as an alliance of two families and involves the incorporation of outsiders as wives into the family. The resulting village exogamy ensures a break between the natal family and the family into which a woman is married. The practice of marrying young girls into distant villages and into families with which previous contact has been limited at best and subsequent contacts are usually infrequent heightens women's powerlessness. Though there is no strict predominance of village exogamy, but the present study also confirms the preference for marital alliance between families from distant villages.

- It helps to keep the petty daily problems encountered by women far from their parents.

-Housewife

Education of women plays an imperative role not just in the development of the women in general but in the proper socialisation of their next generation. Education of women is a major concern to be addressed particularly in Bishnupriya society. Though the enrolment of girls in primary and secondary education is encouraging but the consistent drop outs of female children from post secondary education continue to haunt the overall development of women in the society, which is why there is a considerable difference reported in the education of the spouses which further limit the autonomy of young married women. The negative perspective of the head of the family (men) in a patriarchal society in favour of this inequality is further aggravating the crisis.

- Women should not be educated as they are mostly not interested in studies but in love affairs.

- Priests

- If women are given education they are hard to control

- Event manager

- Only women education can solve the problem that our society is experiencing today.

- Teacher

- My education today is helping my family in every way, most importantly economically.

- Housewife.

The practice of dowry is diverse in different parts of the coun-

try and several hypotheses may be raised for this regional difference in dowry payments. For one, as Srinivas (1989) has suggested, there are two types of dowry, traditional and modern. In traditional dowry, dowry transfers and content remain essentially traditional—payments include predominantly jewellery and gold along with some household gifts, and are generally regarded as the property of women. On the other hand, in modern dowry, dowry transfers follow the modern type, comprising a lump sum of money along with the “many and much desired of products of modern technologies” (Srinivas, 1989, p. 14). The people in the Bishnupriya society prefer to call dowry as marriage gifts which can be categorised as traditional, where payments include mostly jewellery and household goods as furniture and utensils which are essential for women to use. Though over the years the modern appliances has taken the place of traditional household goods. For example, Rosenzweig and Stark (1989) show that parents marry their daughters in villages where incomes co-vary less with respect to their own village, but in Bishnupriya society the respect and social status of the both the family do play a major role in the selection of spouses.

We don't have the practice of dowry, but bride's parents do give presents for their daughters if they want.

- Priest.

Economic status of the bride's family determines the amount of dowry (Marriage Gift).

- Unmarried educated youth.

Economically well off parents who can afford more dowries, prefer to give their daughters to economically established husbands.

- Housewife

Bishnupriya Manipuri society may consider themselves a closed exogamous society, but in this era of globalisation most of the societies struggle to keep their culture intact. After studying the marriage patterns of this society similar trend can be observed where influences of majority culture can be easily recognized in their practices. But though few cases of inter community and within clan marriages can be spotted, overall the community have still managed to keep their “blood clean”. The impact of education and media is reflected in the mounting say particularly of the girls in the determining their partners in their marriage. But at the same time the study also reveals the poor overall status of education particularly of the girls; consequently the study confirms the prevalence of spousal education and age difference. Poor status of women can also be gauged from the preference for marital relationship outside the village (village exogamy), which heightens women's powerlessness (Committee on the Status of Women in India, 1973). The practice of dowry also reflects patriarchal values, though Bishnupriya Manipuri society claims that dowry is more voluntary than compulsion, but it can hardly be contested that women's status in the family of her in laws is measured by the amount of dowry she brings. To add to it the strict prohibition of divorce in Bishnupriya Manipuri further amplifies their catastrophe.

Poor status of education as a whole and women's' education in particular has emerged strongly from the findings of the study. Making women educated is the pre requisite not merely for their equality and empowerment but for the development of the nation as whole for the role they play in the formation of our next generation. It can only help to change the stereo-type perceptions people hold about women's role and make it clear that development of a country is linked to women's welfare and productivity as it is to its man's.

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