

Customary Beliefs and Practices of Marriage among the Assamese Brahmins

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Abstract

Social institutions have special roles in a society without which a society will cease to exist. They form the elements of the social structure through which a society moves through its pace. The smallest unit of the society is the family and the family is formed on the basis of the union of man and woman through a socially sanctioned institution of marriage. The marriage besides fulfilling the man's basic physical urge helps in the continuity of the society through some prescribed rules and regulations of each society which varies in space and time. Such rules and regulations are laid down by our ancestors long before and are still in vogue though changes have been noticed in every society. Among the Assamese society of North East India, we can observe these practices among various caste groups. The paper is an attempt to highlight the practices of marriage among the Assamese Brahmins, the caste group which is regarded as having the highest position in the social hierarchical system of India. The study is based on observation and interview method along with the consultation of the secondary data. The study reveals that the Assamese Brahmins still practice their customs and traditions with little variation.

Key words:

Marriage, family, customs, Assamese, culture, brahmin.

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Introduction

Marriage is the legitimate union between the opposite sexes which gets social recognition through its numerous beliefs and practices prescribed by a society. It is the basis of a family and the family is the basic unit of a society. Through marriage, a society begins its process of structural continuity. At prehistoric level of human existence, there was a complete promiscuity where the actual father could not be traced but as the history of mankind marched forward, people developed the sense of some rules and regulations to control their ways of behaviours which made man different from the lower creatures. This developmental process can be related to man's rational thinking due to the possession of the higher cranial capacity and conscience. A settled way of life started during the Neolithic Stage and since then the semi structural society came into existence with sets of rules and regulations both in the public and the private spheres of life. With Darwin's speculation of the evolution of man on earth, social scientists too were busy in finding out the development of social institutions in the society. They studied different societies in order to find the survivals of the past history of mankind and its customs relating to different social institutions. Thus they were able to put forward different theories regarding the social and the cultural developments of society. Every society has its own sets of social order which can be termed as culture irrespective of its level of developments. Such set of rules and regulation or the customary practices are focused in the social institutions as family, marriage, kinship, religion etc which also reflects the thought process or the culture psychology of the people.

The rules and regulations of marriage varies from society to society. However it can be said that the marriage begins from a promiscuous level to a polygamous level and finally to monogamy. Many social scientists have tried to define marriage in different ways in order to attach the importance of the social institution. "Marriage has been a central idea of study since the beginning of Anthropology, as a main factor in explaining the variety of kinship systems" (Morgan 1870, and Rivers 1914). "Marriage is a set of cultural patterns to sanction parenthood and provide a suitable background for care and rearing of the children" (Beals and Hoizer 1953). " marriage is a union between a man and a woman such that children birth to the woman are recognized legitimate offsprings of both parents"(R. A.1892)

"Hindu literature has preserved some traces of promiscuity existing in the prehistoric times" (Altekar,1956). According to the Great Epic Mahabharata, it was the sage Svetaketu who emphasized the need of marriage instead of promiscuity when it was a natural law. A tale relating to marriage is "Once Svetaketu, the son of rishi Uddalka was sitting by the side of his parents, at that time suddenly a Brahmin came to his mother and asked her 'Let us go". Svetaketu took this behaviour of the stranger as an act of gross misconduct. At this Uddalka

told him that it was the system prevalent in those olden days and so he should not be offended.” (Basu, 1892). The institution of marriage was well established in the Rigveda and it was regarded as a sacred duty to marry through prescribed rites and rituals. An unmarried person is regarded as an unholy person according to Vedic philosophy. The varna ashram in the early Vedic age (2500 BCE to 1500 BCE) also indicates the importance of ‘*garhastya*’ (familial life) as one of the stages of human life.

In India there are different customary practices relating to the Hindu marriage ceremony though the basic philosophy behind the institution remains the same. In North India, the pre-wedding customs like the *haldi* ceremony, *mehendi* ceremony and *sangeet* are very popular, while the custom of applying *sindoor* (vermillion) is performed by the groom and *mangalsutra* (sacred necklace) is also tied by the groom around the bride’s neck.

In South India too there are various pre-wedding ceremonies followed by sacred bath, gift - exchanges coupled with singing and dancing while the exchanging garlands between the bride and the groom and offering the *mangalsutra* are the special characteristics.

In West India pre-wedding ceremony is performed by many customary practices and exchanges. Exchange of sugar is a special characteristics among the people of Maharashtra during the formal engagement of the marriage. Garba dance or the Dandiya is a popular pre-wedding festival among the Gujratis. Among some communities during the time of bride’s farewell ,a coconut is placed under the car wheel .

East Indian customs too reflect the same festive mood with wide range of customary practices those vary with regional variations carrying slight differences in the performances. Among the Bengalis, the pre-wedding ceremony is known as ‘*Ashirwad*’. During the wedding ceremony, the bride has to sit on a stool and lifted up by her brothers and has to make seven rounds around the groom known as ‘*saat paak*’. The groom applies the sindoor on the bride’s hair parting while among the Assamese the vermillion is put during the pre-wedding ceremony by the groom’s mother . The custom of offering ‘*mangalsutra*’ is not prevalent among the East Indian culture. In Odhisa the couple has to take seven steps together. In East India among some communities the exchanges of the betlenuts and fish are very common.

Objectives

The main objective of the paper is to investigate the nature of marriage , the rituals and the practices among the Assamese Brahmins as there is a dearth of scholarly articles relating to the subject matter.

Methods of study

The methods that are used for the present study are the Anthropological methods of data collection as observation and interview. The secondary data have also been consulted for the study mainly from the books and e-resources.

Discussion

The traditional marriage among the Assamese Brahmins strictly follows caste endogamy and 'gotra' (clan) exogamy as the members of the same gotra are regarded as the children of the same 'rishi'. There are various clans as *Bhardwaj, Sandilya, Parasar, Garg, Madhukalya* etc. However hypergamy is preferred than the hypogamy where a girl loses her social status. Previously a girl was married before attaining her puberty.

Selection of mates

The marriage by negotiation is the prescribed form of marriage and the girl's family at first takes the step to approach the groom's family for the proposal. The process starts by matching the horoscopes of both the would be partners with the help of a 'bamun' (priest) and in case it does not match the marriage between the two is regarded as an unfavourable one and thus both the parties do not move further. Thus the first step in arranging a marriage follows some sort of traditional rules and regulations among the Assamese brahmins. In case if the horoscope matches they move further, in some cases it is found that if the boy and the girl are the eldest ones of the family; the marriage alliance is not preferable. This is because of the belief that as the eldest one of the households are raised in a pampered way and they will not be capable to run the family smoothly.

Date fixing

If every step matches properly the process is followed by the selection of the mates by seeing each other either formally or informally and if both of them have no objection, they move towards the next step which is known as '*biyar din thik kora*' (fixing date of the marriage). For fixing the date, the family members generally the elderly people come to the bride's house and the bride's family members take special care by offering sumptuous food and gifts to the groom's family members. Offering '*Gamocho*' (traditional towel) and '*pan tamul*' (betlenuts) to the groom's family member is a customary practice. Thus the process of ceremonial exchanges takes place along with the fixing of the date of marriage.

Pre-wedding rituals

Suwagor dhan bandha -Before nine or seven or five days of marriage, there is a practice called '*suwagor dhan bandha*' (husking of rice joyfully for marriage) which is

regarded as very sacred. The married women of paternal side take part in this task very gleefully singing '*biya nam*'(traditional song of marriage). The rice is required for the religious performances in the marriage rituals.

Joron- The day before marriage is known as '*telor bhar*' or '*juron*', where the family members of groom's side along with friends visit the bride's house carrying some special items for gifts to the bride. At the entrance of the bride's house the groom's party is ceremonially welcomed by the bride's mother and other family members. Ceremonial exchange of '*xorai*'(traditional Assamese vessel) with betlenuts by the mothers of both the bride and the groom are performed among many families. This is followed by the ceremonial entry of the groom's party into the bride's house to adore the bride with their cloths and ornaments those they carry specially for the bride. Vermillion is put generally by the mother of the groom by pouring oil on her parting. Thus putting the vermillion is a symbolical entry of the bride into the groom's familial tree. Some items are asked to the bride to touch such as a fish and betlenuts which are also the symbolical representation culture of the area. These items are regarded as sacred in Assamese society and thus its incorporation into this sacred social union .The bride is adorn with "*mekhela chador*'(traditional Assamese dress) and ornaments gifted by the groom's family. Finally the bride takes blessings of the elderly members of the groom's family members .

Wedding rituals

Nuwani- In the morning of the marriage day, the mother of the bride and the groom in their respective houses along with some married women go to a nearby river or a pond to collect water which is regarded as holy and used for bathing the bride and the groom. '*Nakh komua*' (nail cutting) is done by a barber before the ceremonial bathing. Bathing takes place by spilling "*mah haldhi*" (pulses and turmeric) paste to the bride and the groom's body under a special kind of arrangement of banana saplings kown as '*bay*'. After bathing, the bride or the groom has to tear a portion of the banana tree with her or his teeth so that the sacred tree can't be attacked by any black magic. The mother's brother generally puts the bride and the groom in her lap and takes away from the bathing area so that she or he doesn't touch the ground which may be polluted by some black magic. The concept of magic is thus associated with the religious practice of marriage.

Nandimukh Sraddha- "*Nandi mukho sraddha*"(ancestral worship) is done in both the bride's and the groom's house in order to appease the deceased forefathers' of nine generation and to gain blessings from them which is also locally known as the '*na puruxor sraddha*'. Before the

ancestral worship certain rituals concerning the bride are performed by the priest with the assistance of the bride's father.

Dora agosa- In the night time the groom along with his friends and relatives come to the bride's house for performing the marriage ceremony. The groom's party is barred from entering the bride's house directly and he is to face many questions and also have to offer some amount of money to the bride's party which is known as '*dora agosa*'. Traditional marriage songs are sang by sprinkling of rice between both the two parties. The groom's feet is washed by the sister of the bride or the father of the bride very auspiciously and finally the groom is allowed to enter inside the house or '*robhatoli*' (a sitting arrangement to perform the marriage). After performing some rituals the marriage ceremony begins by lighting "*hom*" (sacred fire) by the priest.

Saptapadi- Seven rounds around the fire by the bride- groom is the essential part of marriage which is in Sanskrit words is "*Saptapadi*" which means seven steps. "*Sapta*" means seven and "*padas*" means steps. The bride groom makes vows before the sacred fire or "*Agni*", the vedic God of fire. The bride and groom is symbolized as the Shiva and Parvati (Hindu Gods and Goddesses). Finally offering of "*akhoi*" (puffed rice) by the bride's brother to the sacred fire is a spiritual transition of the bride to her new family and taking blessings of the God of Fire. **Kanyadaan-** This is succeeded by offering the daughter by the father to the groom's hand which is known as "*Kanyadaan*" when her paternal familial ties are cut down which known as "*gotra singa*" and she enters into her new family. This is a very emotional and sentimental part of a marriage where the father has to offer her beloved daughter to another person.

This is followed by another popular cultural practice of playing a game known as '*anguthi lukuwa*' where a ring is placed in a bowl full of rice and both the bride and the groom is to find the ring, whoever first finds the ring is regarded as the winner. This practice is associated with much fun and jokes. After all these ceremonial performances, the groom and his family takes her to her new home where she is greeted religiously by her in laws' family members.

Athmongola- After eight days of marriage a feast is organized in the bride's paternal family where the groom along few other members of the groom's side are invited to the bride's house which is known as '*aath mangola*' or '*neuta*'. Thus the the whole process of the marriage ends with a social and a spiritual tone of fulfilment.

At present context one can easily notice some changes in the pattern of marriage among the Assamese society as a whole though the intangible elements of culture is almost the same. The individual choice marriages are occurring in large numbers, besides the caste endogamy is also not a strict rule. In case of arrange marriage, the case is slight different as they follow

the traditional way of caste endogamy and clan exogamy. North Indian custom as the 'mehendirasam' is now very popular among the Assamese marriage as a whole. Even the western cultural elements as the 'cocktail party' is also finding its way into the Assamese marriage ceremony among the elite section of the society which is generally seen in the city and some urban centres. Previously marriages took place in the households but today most of the urbanite people prefer marriage halls or hotels in order to perform the ceremony. This changing trend can be ascribed to the smaller space around the dwelling house and also due to the lesser numbers of family members available in the household to manage the task properly. In the rural areas, however marriages are conducted in the households. One recent trend that is observed in the urban areas among some couples is the live-in- relationship before marriage irrespective all the caste groups in the society which undoubtedly is a serious blow to the traditional marriage of the Assamese society.

Conclusion

Assamese Brahmins follow a set of specific rules and customs to conduct a marriage. They follow the vedic rituals along with the customary practices to render essence to their observances. Many changes have been noticed in the marriage practice of the Assamese Brahmins in the present context, though the main rituals are still in practice. Many newer trends have entered into the Assamese marriage which alters the image of the traditional concept of Assamese marriage. Marriage songs which are very much integral to Assamese society are losing its ground. Even the customary practices fades its meanings as the new generation is not much aware of such practices and beliefs. As such there is a need to understand the meanings and significances of these traditional practices loaded with wisdom as they can be an eye opener for our present and future generation.

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