

TRANSITION IN GAROS MARRIAGE SYSTEM : AN OBSERVATION

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Abstract

Marriage is considered as universal social institution, closely connected with the institution of family. However, its practice is not universal across the world. It varies in terms of caste, class, religions and regions. Among them, indigenous people or tribal have their distinctive marriage system, based on traditional customs and rituals. With the passage of time, however, the marriage practices have been changing triggered by certain forces. In this context, this article has vividly explained the marriage system of Garos and various forces, which have made responsible for the transitions of their marriage systems. It explains that spread of Christianity, influence of patriarchal society, rapid urbanization, spread of education and the process of modernization have been playing a greater role in making such transitions.

I

Marriage is one of the universal social institutions and it is closely connected with the institution of family. Marriage as an institution and its forms and functions vary from society to society across the world. However, it is a fact that family and marriages are complementary to each other, which is prevailing almost everywhere in the world. Marriage as an institution has been recognized by all religions and it makes the base of civilized society, sound moral system and domestic affection. Family is considered as the most significant unit of society and marriage is the foundation of it. According to Gough, "marriage is a socially recognized and normatively prescribed relationship between at least two persons that defines economic and sexual rights and other duties, each owes the other or others and provides the primary mechanism in a society by which offspring are recognized as legitimate and accorded full birth-status rights common to normal members of their society or social stratum. 'History of Human marriage' defines marriage as the more or less durable connection between male and female lasting beyond the mere act of propagation till after the birth of offspring.

The entire North-East India comprising Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura is frequented by different groups of people from time immemorial in the form of migration from Burma and other places. Thus we find people of Mongoloid strains in respect of their physical features, culture, language, etc. There are altogether 131 tribes with identifiable characteristics and traits distributed in different areas

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of this region and as weaker sections of the people, the Govt of India categorised them as 'Scheduled' so as to make the upliftment schemes available to them as provided in the constitution of India.

It is true that this enchanted land known as the North-East region attracted waves of diverse ethnic groups through ages. It has come to stay as the confluence of the most colourful mosaic of ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. Together with this, there are different social systems among the tribal groups which can be divided hardly into three categories as follows :

1. The matrilineal tribes- In this, the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos of Meghalaya are included.
2. The homogeneous patrilineal tribes- The Kuki-Mizo tribes of Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura constitute this category.
3. The heterogeneous patrilineal tribes- The Naga of Nagaland and Manipur and the Arunachali tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are the groups of this category.

The system of marriage of any given society is antiquatedly high as the society itself. It ultimately becomes the custom, the system of which had not been coded by a legislative enactment. Thus it is the high antiquity of the custom which gives validity. The aim of this study is to focus on marriage system and their transition among Garo Community.

II

The Garo is a major matrilineal tribal community of North East India inhabiting mostly in the Garo hills district of Meghalaya and small section of them is also found to be scattered in different places of North East i.e. Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. They call themselves as Achikmande which literally means 'Hill man'. Ethnically the Garos belong to the Bodo group of the Mongoloid racial stock and they believe that their original home was in Tibet. However, most of the scholars are of the opinion that the Garos like the other Bodo groups of people belong to the Tibeto-Chinese family whose cradle is said to have been the North Western China. They have their own dialect which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of Bodo linguistic group. They call their dialect Achikkusik which literally means 'Voice of the hills'.

Garo Marriage Laws

The customs of marriage and laws of the Garos are based on the matrilineal system which is distinct from other societies, based on unwritten, but tacitly understood codes of customary laws, usages and practices concomitant to holy matriarchism. It believes the law of exogamy, law of monogamy and polygamous marriage, which are discussed in details below.

The Law of Exogamy : The Garo generally practice exogamy which prohibits marrying from the mother's clan or machong (motherhood). For example, a Sangma cannot marry a Sangma or Marak a Marak and so on. A man or a woman who is a Sangma may marry only into his or her father's step who may be a Marak, usually the off spring of the father's sister, or the daughter or son of the maternal uncle. This is especially true in the case of the nokna (heiress) who, if she is a 'Koksi' from the motherhood of Sangma, can never take another

Koksi for a husband, who has either to be her father's sister or the maternal uncle's son. Thus a marriage in a Garo family is always exogamous, and a husband and a wife can never belong to the same motherhood.

The Law of Monogamy : According to this law, a man may marry only one wife and this custom is applicable only to poor families who cannot afford to maintain more than one wife. Even in ancient days, the chra (maternal uncle or brother) and the mahari (a whole group consisting of all the relatives of the wife and the husband) did not permit the man who could not afford to maintain the family, to have two wives. The laws of monogamy are strictly adhered to by the Christians Garo and no Christian is allowed to have two wives at the same time and can only remarry after the death of the first wife. However, the Garo Songsarek (non-Christians) does not strictly adhere to this customary law.

Polygamous Marriage : The polygamous marriage allow a man to marry more than one wife, but not more than three times. According to Playfair (1975:69) "a Garo man may marry two sisters, but he must marry the elder before the younger. Before taking a second wife, it is customary for a man to obtain the permission of the first, and a breach of this rule entitles her to compensation. The second wife may be of a different clan from that of the first, but it is more usual for her to belong to the same step and motherhood."

Forms of Marriage among the Garos

There are various forms of Marriage, which are recognized by their customary laws. The following are the important forms of Marriage.

Dosia Marriage : It is one of the principal forms of Marriage practiced by Garos known as 'Dosia', which is recognized by their customary laws. The term Dosia means 'Killing a fowl'. According to this custom sacrifices are made in the marriage ceremony by giving some alcoholic drink (chu or rice-beer), two chicken (small) and one large cock. After the ceremony of sacrifice, chicken are roasted and it is taken by all the community members. However, it is to note here that the chicken of the cock is only taken by non-relations of the marriage parties. This practice is made in order to predict whether the wedded pair will be happy or otherwise, the entrails of the cock are observed. That is to say, if the hooks at the end of the entrails should be of equal size and form, the bright future of the wedded couple is ensured. The officiating priest strikes the bride and bridegroom with closed fist three times on the back and thus the marriage is completed.

Tunappa Marriage (enter to sleep with) : This form of marriage is practiced when a man enters the hut of the girl by night to lie down with her and it is generally done with the consent of the girl and that of her parents but without the knowledge of the mahari. If the mahari does not forbid it, however, and does nothing within month's time to drive the boy away from the house, the union is thereby legalized and the two are regarded as husband and wife without further ceremony.

Nokrom Sika (marriage by capture) : It is a sort of forced marriage, especially from the girl's side. A man of some social standing in consultation with his wife and chras selected a boy who was the nearest nephew of the girl's father. If all agreed that the proposed was the

most suitable and fittest to be a nokrom (another term used for heiress) of the house and carried confidence of those people especially the parents of the girl that he would look after the house of his uncle.

Then a probe would be made as the inclination of the chosen boy, whether he would come in willing to the advice of his parents and relatives that he should not shake off the responsibility of the nearer nephew in accordance with the old-time customs and tradition of the tribe. In spite all these if the boy meant resistance the man (boy's uncle) would arrange five or six strong persons usually related to girl to capture him. After captured the boy he was kept in a specially prepared room in the main house of the girl.

In the evening, the concerned girl, the nokna of the house would come in to the room with water cocked rice and curry. The boy might refuse to take them. After a day or two the boy could no longer bear his hunger and thirst and would be persuaded to take some food and drink water. Then she would try to serve him like a wife and shared the meal and talking in gentle and loving voice and would remain in the room at night. If the boy showed some favour and care and affection, there would be Dosia marriage in the morning and all came to an end.

Marriage based on negotiations or proposal

In patrilineal societies, generally proposals are made from the boy side, however, it is opposite in the matrilineal society of Garos. The proposals are made from the girl side, especially given by the old folk of the bride's mother's lineage. This type of process takes relatively longer period of time and needs number of formalities to complete. Here the maternal uncle (preferably the eldest one) of the bride takes the lead part. If everything is clear and satisfactory there will be an engagement and the date of the marriage will be fixed.

After marriage the son-in-law comes to live in his wife's parent's home and becomes the father-in-laws nokrom, that is to say, a kind of representative of the father's clan in the mother's family. After the death of the father-in-law the nokrom marries the widowed mother-in-law, thus becoming the husband of both mother and daughter.

III

Marriage System in Transition

As already explained above that, Garos marriages are made according to their own distinct customary laws; however, these practices have been changing in the recent years triggered by number of factors. Such factors include the spread of Christianity, influence of patriarchal society, rapid urbanization, spread of education and the process of modernization etc.

Role of Christianity : In the recent years, it has seen that Garos have been converting to Christianity and it has influenced a great extent in changing their marriage system too and created new form of compromise between the indigenous process and Christian method. In many cases the converted Garos have been practicing the method of Church and side by side some of their traditional marriage customs too. Thus, a new form of marriage institution has come up known as Garo-Christian marriage institution, where many customs are still pre-

served and many new things are added.

In the early years, Garo people have been performing their marriage ceremony with a series of rites and offering of sacrifices to spirits. However, these practiced are disappearing with the spread of Christianity among them. Now marriages are being conducted in the church by the church elder instead of their customary chief. Also, in terms of their marriage feast, the pattern of food has also drastically changed. Garo tribe used to celebrate marriage ceremony with a special feast with rice, pork and chu, however, in the present day the traditional items are replaced by tea, cakes etc.

Role of Patriarchal Society : The Garos interactions with patriarchal society around them too have been influencing a lot in changing their marriage practices. Since their interactions with patrilineal system and culture have been continuing several decades ago, it has influenced them in every aspect of their life.

Role of Urbanization : Rapid urbanization and higher mobility of people from rural to urban is not only changing the life style and culture of people in general, it has too influences a lot to Garos. The spread of urbanization has given rise to more chances of intermingling of people of different communities and thus has lead to the adaption of different cultural traits among the Garos. This process has altered their perception of matrilineal culture especially in marriage system among them.

Role of Education : Education plays an important role for the progress of the society. On the other hand, it too plays a crucial role in changing the habits and practices of people, which have been practices since long time, based on customary laws. The spread of education among Garos has not only brought changes in their life style and culture, it too has influenced a lot in changing their marriage rituals.

At the present time, education has become an asset and parents too consider sons and daughters to be educated. However the spread of education among them have been changing their thoughts in various ways. Referring to the marriage system, it has given rise for desire among the males to forms a neo-local family rather than staying with their in-laws. The changes have also occurred in case of female to set-up a neo-local family. They feel insecure staying with their in-laws and make an understanding between husband and wife to have more of neo-local families.

Role of Modernization : The process of modernization and the emergence of modern society have been playing a major role in changing the society and its customs and traditions across the world. The forces of modernization have been causing the disappearance of distinctive cultural practices and mainstream cultures are getting stronger. The Garos are too not exempt from the forces of modernization. The Garos and their contacts with their modern society have changed them adopting many traits from other cultures. Modernization has greatly impact upon their inheritance of property ownership. In the recent years, Garos prefer to divide the property equally among all children, be it daughter or son. It has also found that, parents who have one son and daughter prefer to stay separately after marriage.

Conclusion

There have been various studies on Garos and Playfair has brilliantly worked on the changing marriage customs of Garos. According to him (Playfair 1975: 64) "the inevitable rule of exogamy is changing. Many Garo tribes are breaking away from the old customs and nearly ten percent of marriages are in violation of the rules of exogamous marriage. Some persons even get marry within their own motherhood". If there is marriage within same clan, the couple is ridiculed as bacdong (marriage between one's relative). In the past it was treated as an offence and those couples were not allowed to stay in the village. However, with the passage of time, it is not being practiced in true spirit. In such situation, the socio-cultural identity of the Garo tribe is a big issue here. From my observation, to understand this situation we need to go deeper into their ongoing socio-cultural existence. It is true and unavoidable to protect them from such forces in the era of modernisation, which are affecting their traditional ways of life. Like other communities of the world, Garos cultural identities too have been challenged in the era of modernization.

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