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Marital Distance and Marriage Alliance among the Meiteis of Cachar District, Assam

Abstract

This paper deals with caste endogamy and marital distance among the Meiteis of Cachar District, Assam. The Meiteis belong to Other Backward Classes (OBC) and they live in three villages of Cachar district of Assam (Khelma, Berakhal and Nayagram). They have migrated during the early part of nineteenth century. The relevant data for the present study was collected through fieldwork in the three villages. It will discuss whether marriage is still a fundamental social institution or any changes noticed during the field study and the residence pattern after marriage will also be included.

Keywords: Meiteis, caste endogamy, clan, marital distance

Introduction

It is through the marital union that alliances are forged between groups and social solidarity is created. The bond of marriage, parenthood and siblings which connect the members of elementary family with one another result in a network of relationship by kinship affinity

Family arises as a result of marriage and it continues through marriage. It is therefore a very important institution which the society could never be sustained. Since the beginning anthropologist have been trying to present a satisfactory definition of marriage and over the years it became clear that cohabitation, ritual recognition, definition of sexual rights or stipulations of domestic services serves as a criterion for all the unions intuitively felt compelled to call 'marriage'. Thus marriage is an union between a man and a woman, such that the children born to the woman are recognized legitimate offspring of both parents (1951;110). . According to Dr. Westermarck '*marriage is a more or less a durable connection between a male and female casting beyond the mere act of propagation till and after the birth of offspring's*'. Marriage enables a child to get socially recognized father and mother. Marriage is therefore a permanent legal union between a man and a woman.

Notes and Queries definition contains two criteria: that marriage is a union between one man and one woman and that it establishes the legitimacy of children. In all human societies marriage is an institution of vital importance. Depending on society marriage may be monogamous or polygamous, in the latter case there is a polygamous or polyandrous marriage.

This paper will deal with marriage among the Meiteis living in three villages of Cachar district of Assam(Khelma, Berakhal and Nayagram). They have migrated during the early part of nineteenth century. It will include marriage rituals and will discuss about whether marriage is still a fundamental social institution or are there any changes noticed during the recent days.

Methodology

The data for the present study were collected from three Meitei villages of Cachar District, Assam. The data were collected during the years 2011-2013. A structured household schedule was used to collect primary data on population pattern and others. Data on marriage and related aspects including rituals, residence after marriage, marital distance and others were collected using focused interviews, genealogical methods and case study methods.

The People

The Meiteis of the three study villages of Cachar district are originally migrants from Manipur. They came to Barak valley in Assam as early as the early part of 19th century during the reign of Krishna Chandra

Suryatapa Nath
Research Scholar
Dept.of Anthropology,
Gauhati University

Chandana Sarma
Assistant Professor,
Dept.of Anthropology,
Cotton College
Guwahati

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(1780-1813) in Cachar. According to historical records, the Meitei Prince occupied the whole of the plain portion of Cachar by overthrowing Govinda Chandra, the then ruler of Cachar. In 1818, during the Burmese aggression in Manipur, the migration of the Meiteis further increased. This event compelled a good number of Manipuris to flee from Manipur to Cachar. Being an offshoot of the Meiteis of Manipur, these Meiteis carry with themselves the traditional culture of their homeland. However, Meiteis of the Barak valley are influenced by the culture and traditions of the people of Barak valley. Dominated by the Bengalis they are surrounded by some Nepali and Barmans of Cachar district.

Marriage

The Meiteis follow the rule caste endogamy of clan exogamy. To know about the Meitei marriage rule one has to know about the seven clans of Meitei community. Meiteis are divided into seven clans which they call as yek or salais and these seven salais/yeks are further subdivided into 432 sageis or yumnaks (sub clans). The seven yeks are as follows:

1. Ninthouja (116 sageis)
2. Angom (47 sageis)
3. Chenlei (31 sageis)
4. Khaba Nangba (16sagei)
5. Luwang (57 sageis)
6. Khunam (101 sageis)
7. Moirang (64)

Meiteis have a complex form of arrangement for marriage alliances and since time immemorial they have been following these rules religiously. The rules are described in the following manner:

- E Tinnaba: E tinnaba or Puddinaba means offsprings of the same progenitor. It imposes restriction on marriage among the members of the same progenitor. The seven salais (clans) are further divided into many sageis (sub-clans), all the members of a clan and its respective sagaeis are considered as offsprings of the same progenitor (pukok), and therefore debarred from the marriage alliance.
- Pen Tinnaba: in this rule children of same mother but different father are prohibited from marriage alliance as they are considered as siblings. But this law lapses after third generation.
- Leinung pen- Tinnaba: Another rule is that descendents having common grandmother both paternal and maternal cannot marry till the third generation. Even though grandmother married to different yek, children cannot establish marital ties as they belong to the same grandmother.
- Shairuk /shirup tinnaba: In this rule descendents belonging to different mother and single father are prohibited for matrimonial alliance. Though they are born from different mothers but they all fall under the hereditary line of coming from their father and thus considered as siblings.
- Mungnaba : it is also very well known as sapinda rule of marriage in which matrimonial alliances are prohibited till seventh generation in the male line and it prohibited till the fifth generation in the female line.

- Pellal Tinnaba: One cannot establish marriage relationship with the girls of maternal grandmothers' lineage. These girls fall within the Law of Pellal Tinnaba.
- Ee-Oinaba: there are some yumnaks which fall beyond the restricted generation marriage of Pee-tinnaba and Pen tinnaba are also prohitod from matrimonial alliance. These keeping of exogamous relationship are known as EE-oinaba.

These marriage rule are the basic rule which has been followed by the Meitei people since ancient time. But these rules are losing its importance in recent times as the present generation have spread and settled over different areas and came in contact with other communities. Nowadays elopement is seen as a common form of marriage but marriages arranged by family is still very common among the three studied villages. It will be clear from the table below:

**Table1:
Types Of Marriages Practised Within The Study Villages, 2011-12**

Villages	No. of married individual	Arranged marriage	Marriage by Elopement	Love marriage but not elopement
Khelma	98	63 (65.31)	30 (30.61)	5(5.10)
Berakhal	142	84(59.15)	53(37.32)	5(3.52)
Nayagram	208	11 (53.36)	30(30.61)	5(5.10)

From the above table it can be concluded that arranged form of marriage is still the dominant form of marriage practiced in the villages. Although marriage by elopement is also very much common in the village but young generations prefer to go by their parents' will.

**Table 2:
Marriage Ties (Intra-Community And Inter-Community) Of The Study Villages,2011-12**

Villages	No. married individuals	Within the community (intra-community)	Outside the community (inter-community)	
Khelma	98	94 (95.91)	Bengali	2
			Assamese	1
			Mizo	1
			4 (4.08)	
Berakhal	142	135 (95.07)	Khasi	1
			Garo	1
			Assamese	1
			Bengali	3
			Dimasa	1
			Total	7 (4.92)
Nayagram	208	196 (94.23)	Muslim	1
			Assamese	3
			Bengali	5
			Nepali	2
			Kuki	1
			12 (5.79)	

From the tables above it can be concluded that among the Meitei of the three studied villages arranged marriage is more common and they prefer mates from their own community more than others. Even though the present generation has spread over different areas but still they prefer mates from their

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own community and they are well aware of their marriage rules. But exceptions are also seen. It has been revealed from the table that the Meiteis of the three studied villages have established marital ties with others like the Khasis, the Garos, the Mizos, Dimasas and Kukis (tribal) and Assamese, Bengali and Nepali communities and even Muslim. Though clan exogamy and caste endogamy are the preferred rules, it is found that not everybody adheres to those norms. With change in outlook in recent days people are crossing boundaries and establishing alliances with other communities also.

Residence After Marriage

A marriage result in the creation of a new family and the question arises as to where the couple resides after marriage. When the couple resides in the house of the groom it is called patrilocal or virilocal and when the couple resides in bride's house then it is called matrilocal. Meiteis of the three studied village practice the patrilocal residence after marriage as the newly wedded wife reside in the house of her husband with husband's family. Nowadays it is seen that newly married couple move to an independent household which is known as neolocal residence.

Sometimes due to work purpose the couple is bound to move from their ancestral house to different place, which is one of the reason given the people. The second reason is that they need an independent household and the third reason is due to lack of space in the ancestral house the parents themselves allow the couple to build their own house. Women after marriage settle down with her husband and visit their parents occasionally.

Marriage Distance And Matrimonial Alliance With The Meiteis Of Manipur And Other Parts Of India:

Meiteis of Cachar are not the original inhabitants of Cachar. They have migrated from Manipur during the seven years of devastation (chahi taret khuntapa) in the early 19th century and spread throughout Cachar, Dima Hasao, Kamrup and other parts of North Eastern states and also in Bangladesh. With the spread of the community to a vast area, matrimonial ties were also formed. It will be easy to understand the matrimonial distance of the three villages from the table below:

**TABLE3:
MEITEI WOMEN MARRIED AWAY TO OTHER VILLAGES AND WOMEN BROUGHT TO THE VILLAGE THROUGH MARRIAGE:**

Distance from the village in km	No. of villages linked through marriage			Women married away from the villages			Women married to the villages		
	Khelma	Berakhal	Nayagram	Khelma	Berakhal	Nayagram	Khelma	Berakhal	Nayagram
Within Cachar									
1-5	2	3	5	3 14.28	4 7.40	19 16.23	13 12.74	12 8.45	21 10.09
6-10	4	4	4	1 4.76	14 25.92	24 20.51	15 14.70	24 16.90	37 17.78
11-15	5	2	3	1 4.76	4 7.40	12 10.25	19 18.62	11 7.74	38 18.26
16-20	1	4	7	1 4.76	8 14.81	16 13.67	23 22.54	37 26.06	47 22.59
21-+	2	6	4	2 9.52	5 9.25	9 7.69	11 10.78	21 14.78	13 6.25
Within the village				3 14.24	3 5.55	4 3.41	3 2.94	3 2.11	4 1.92
Outside Cachar village within Assam				5 23.80	7 12.96	21 17.94	4 3.92	14 9.85	28 13.26
From Manipur				1 4.76	6 11.11	5 4.27	11 10.78	13 9.15	13 6.25
Outside Assam and Manipur				3 14.28	3 5.55	7 5.98	2 1.96	7 4.93	7 3.36
Total				21 100	54 100	117 100	102 100	142 100	208 100

From the above table it is seen that the highest number of villages linked through marriage are within the Cachar district. They have very low matrimonial link with states other than Manipur and Assam. It is also seen that they have matrimonial links with the Meiteis of Manipur and it is clear that they still maintain relations with the Meiteis of Manipur.

Age At Marriage Among The People Of Three Studied Villages:

The age set by the Indian constitution for citizens of India to get married is 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys. As this rule is not followed by many communities and among the Meiteis of the three villages also show marriages taking place below the age group of 18 years and 21 years

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but these cases are rarely seen in recent days. The age at marriage of the three villages understudy is shown in the table below.

Table 4:
Age At Marriage Among Meiteis Of The Study Villages,2011-12

Age group	Male			Female		
	Khelma	Berakhal	Nayagram	Khelma	Berakhal	Nayagram
11-15			1 0.48	4 4.08	5 3.52	17 8.17
16-20	6 6.12	3 2.11	16 7.69	21 21.42	18 12.68	57 27.40
21-25	22 22.44	24 16.90	42 20.19	27 27.55	49 34.50	65 31.25
26-30	27 27.55	46 32.39	76 36.53	23 23.46	49 34.50	45 21.63
31-35	26 26.53	53 37.32	53 25.48	18 18.38	19 13.38	20 9.61
36-40	17 17.34	14 9.86	16 7.69	24 24.48	2 1.40	4 1.92
41+		2 1.40	4 1.92			
Total	98 (100)	142 (100)	208 (100)	98 100	142 100	208 100

From the above table it can be concluded that in Nayagram village about 36.53% (76) of boys got married at the age group 26years to 30years and 0.48% (1) got married at the age group of 11year to 15years, which is the lowest number. Among the female members of Nayagram the highest percentage is in between the age group of 21years to 25years that is 31.25% (65) and the lowest is 1.92% (4) which is between the age group of 36years to 40years. In Berakhal about 37.32% boys got married at the age group 31years to 35years whereas in Khelma 27.55% of boys got married at the age group of 26years to 30years. In Berakhal about 2.11% boys got married between the age of 16years to 20years and in Khelma 6.12% boys got married between 16years to 20years. Among the female members of Khelma it is seen that between age group of 21years to 25years 27.55% girls got married. In Berakhal the age group between 21year-25years and 26years to 30years have equal percentage of girls getting married at these age group that is 34.50%. About 8.17% (17) female of Nayagram got married at the age between 11years to 15years, 3.52% (5) female of Berakhal got married at the age of 11years to 15years and in Khelma it is 4.08% (4) females. The highest age limit of marriage for girls is between the ages of 36years to 40years in all the three villages. The highest age limit of marriage among the male members of Nayagram and Berakhal is above 41 whereas it is in between 36years to 40years in case of Khelma.

Rituals In Traditional Meitei Marriage (Lauhungba):

The proposal of marriage first comes from the groom's family. When all the elderly members of the groom's family goes to the girl's house for the proposal then that day is called as *Mangon Kaba*.

To fix the date of marriage, the groom's family goes to the bride's house and they carry with them various fruits, sweets etc this is known as *Waroipath*.

After this the groom's family again goes to the bride's house, another day, and they carry with them seven types of fruits to prepare *Haijing khara*. The bride and the groom's fathers together declare the date of marriage. Then the father of the bride bows down in front of everyone and then accepts the *Haijing khara*. This ritual is known as *Paoth poa*.

One day before the marriage the bride's family goes to the groom's family to invite the groom. Sometimes it is done the on day of wedding. Other then groom other elderly persons of the groom's family are invited that day with flowers and sandalwood powder.

At the house of the bride or at the other banquet hall, alter is prepared for the *kirtan*, which is known as *Palamocha*. The groom's family can enter the bride's house only when the *kirtan* starts. A boy carrying items for marriage rituals on his head stand in the front of the groom's family, after him seven married women carrying *Phengaruk* (bamboo basket filled with fruits and gift items) stands after the boy who carries the *Laipaath*. The seven ladies carrying the *phengaruk* must be married and must be the mother of one boy and girls and the lady leading them should give birth to a boy first. These food items are brought for the bride's family. Before the entrance of the groom, small kids stand at the entrance holding fire lamps *Deuti* to welcome them and sprinkle flower over the groom. Then the youngest brother of the bride washes the feet of the groom. After entering they are arranged to sit in the east side facing the west and the mother of the groom sit opposite to them. At one time the groom is taken to alter where the groom is allowed to seat on a stool facing east. Then the father of the bride seats near the groom and the Brahmin chants out the hymns from the holy book. Then the bride is brought out and she sits on the left hand side of the groom. Their right hands are tied with *Kusharaju* after that the priest makes the chantings. After the chantings are over the bride is made to hold a bell metal dish. Then all relatives bless them with gifts and then the dish is taken away and given to the groom's mother. She accepts the gift on her lap and holds the dish with right hand and covers the dish with a cloth by left hand.

Then their hands are opened and now the bride stands to do the *Saptaprdakhhin* (to go around the groom seven times). In every round she gives salutation to the groom by flowers and at end of seventh round they exchange flower garlands. If the bride feels awkward to walk alone she is accompanied by another lady who sings songs all through the *Saptaprdakhhin*. After that the bride sits in the left side of the groom. The clothes of the bride and the groom are tied and they share sweets and betel nut. At that time the bride and the groom offer gifts to the priest and the Pala mocha group.

On the other hand two ladies from both the side comes with three live fishes and leaves them in a bucket full of water. Of these three one is considered as bride, one as groom and the other as evil body. If the two fishes in the vessel live peacefully then it is

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thought that the newly married couple will lead a happy life. This ritual is known as *Mitam Gna thaba*.

After that the bride starts her way to groom's house. Before going out she stands at the door of the house facing the door from inside and without looking back she sprinkles puffed paddy towards her house. When she enters the groom's house three boys light the Deuti after that she is welcomed in the house by her mother-in-law. Then the bride and the groom are taken to the home altar and then to the Tulsi bheta (sacred basil), where they bow down and offer prayers. After one day or two days after this ceremony, the reception from the groom's family is to be arranged.

One day after the marriage the bride is taken to the kitchen to cook something for all the guests present at home. That is the day when she enters a new kitchen and starts a new life. This ritual is known as *Makhut Loukhatpa*.

On the fifth day after the marriage the bride along with the groom comes to her paternal house. Many close relatives from both the sides gather together and a feast is organized. This is known as *Mangani chak chaba*.

Conclusion:

The above discussion on marriage among the Meiteis of Cachar District showed that they still follow the normal and traditional practice of arranged marriages. It was the duty of the parents to choose suitable mates for their males as well as female wards from amongst the suitable person belonging to their own caste. Earlier marriages were arranged when girls had not attained puberty and boys were minor. In recent days, however, many changes have taken place and child marriages are almost negligible. Moreover, spread of education, economic compulsions and other factors do not permit marriages at an early age as in the past. The consent of the persons to be married acquired a great significance. Even those Meiteis who indulged in love marriages tried their best to seek approval of their parents, either before or after the marriage. In all the three studied villages, an interesting feature noticed is that love marriages were sought to bring under the coverage of arranged marriages, which has the parents' sanction.

With improvements in contacts with the outside world, the ties of marriage alliance has definitely widened. They have entered into marital relations with other castes and communities (even Muslims) of the region as well as outside Assam and Manipur. There is thus, considerable increase in marital distance. But, the traditional pattern of marriage structure has not collapsed. Even today, the parents and relatives of a boy or a girl are responsible for their marriage on the same lines as before. No doubt there are internal shifts in interpersonal and group relations. There is considerable flexibility in the age of marriage. Boys, these days are economically self-independent before marrying and both boys and girls are consulted before arranging a marriage.

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