

“Pan Onaⁱ”: A Traditional Marriage System Among The Tai Khamyang Community

Sikandar kumar

M.Phil Scholar, Dept. of Sociology

Dibrugarh University

Abstract

Marriage is one of prime social institution that has an important role in maintain social order and control in terms sexual relationship among the people of a society. On the other hand the “Tai Khamyang” a tribal group of Assam that has distinct marriage system. Hence this paper is an attempt to understand the various aspects of traditional marriage system and the changes that occurring due to emergence of some modern social forces in the society.

Keywords: *Tai Khamyang, Social Institution, Marriage System, Modernization.*

Introduction

A great branch of Mongoloid population with anthropological aspect is known as “Tai community”. The Tai are scattered throughout South Asia and Southeast Asia. From the older days Tai people were giving their racial identity.(Rajkhowa, 2013)According to *Padmeswar Gogoi*, “The Tai is a generic name denoting a great branch of the Mongoloid population of Asia”. (Moran, 2009).Moreover “Tai is a title of royal officer who has a right of inheritance in the property of another and use of this title began before 2500 BC”. According to the history of China the king of the “Tai community” of China used this title and latter this Tai word was also used among the people who were experts in politics. In different places there are different name explaining the Tai community. The Tai in Burma of East Asia is known as “*Pathan*”, “*Simig*”, “*Nou*”, and “*Pai*” only south and middle Burma people use the correct sounded spelling word “*Thai*”. The Tai of Assam is also known by their native names. At various time, outsiders Tai started to colonize Assam who was certified as “native Tai” by their native people. So that is why, the Tai used the word “*Tai*” before their native names (Rajkhowa, 2013). The six Tai races residing in Assam are-

- 1) *Ahom*,
- 2) *Khamti*,
- 3) *Phake*,
- 4) *Aiton*,
- 5) *Khamyang and*
- 6) *Turung*.

From these above races, the traditional marriage system of Tai *Khamyang* community will be selected for the study.The Tai Khamyangs also known as Shyam are a sub-group of the great Tai people of Southeast Asia. They are numerically a small indigenous Assamese community group found in Tinsukia, Jorhat, Sivsagar and Golaghat districts of Assam as well as adjacent parts of Arunachal Pradesh. Khamyang itself is a tai word, deriving etymologically from “*kham*”(gold) and “*yang*” or *jang* (to have) and meaning “people having gold”. They ruled an independent principality in Mungkon until the end of the 18th century. Many *Khamyang* have historically used “*shyam*”, which is a cognate with “*Siam*”, the old word for Thailand as a surname. (Rajkhowa, 2013)

RELATED LITERATURES:

The related literature enables the researcher to define the limits of his field. The knowledge of related literature brings the researcher up-to-date on the work which others have done and thus to state the objectives clearly and concisely (Koul, 2009). Ajanta Rajkhowa in the work “*Tai Khamyang Xamaj aru Sanskriti*” (2013) has talked about marriage as a social approval for a married life. On the backdrop of every society, marriage is a system where ritual aspect lies within it. Through the system of marriage, one may protect the continuity of the universe along with a social relation that grows within it. In every society, marriage is performed through various rituals and customs. In this book Rajkhowa talked about the significance of the *Tai Khamyang* marriage culture. No dowry system exists in *Tai Khamyang* society. But ornaments made of gold and silver and other households are offered by the bride’s family. Rajkhowa has also talked about child marriage which is restricted in *Tai Khamyang* society and in distant past widow marriage was seen to be evident in this society. Besides, the *Tai Khamyang* people also follow cross cousin marriage system. In this book Rajkhowa also argued that with modernization and globalization many changes have been taking place in the marriage system of *Tai Khamyang* community.

Dr. Biju Moran in the work, “*Tai Phake Bhaxa aru Sanskriti*” (2009) one of the famous books on *Tai Phake* language and culture has discussed about the marriage system of *Tai Phake* community which is almost similar to *Tai Khamyang* marriage system. In this book the author has stated that marriage among the *Phake* people still continues in a traditional way. They do not have any distinct culture for their marriages. But to marry maternal uncle’s daughter is a tradition. Although it is tradition, it is not mandatory. The author also argued that usually in *Tai Phake* community there is no prohibition to marry a girl within their close relatives. It is noticeable that they expect from their heart and soul to marry among their own community.

Muhammad Zaman in the article “Exchange marriage system and Muslim Family Law in Pakistan” (2009) has dealt with the statutory legislations regarding marriage and family formation, mate selection, inheritance and its relevancy for the exchange marriage system in Pakistan. It locates the scope of the exchange marriage within the context of the existing legislation and the gaps in it. In this article Zaman has also mentioned that generally, there is ‘plethora’ of legislation along with constitutional guarantees, but it remains far from securing the fundamental rights of the people of Pakistan due to certain lacunas in it. Zaman also emphasized that the tradition of marriage by exchange is stronger than the local legislation. A separate part of legislation as well as implementation of it may help to reduce the culture of exchange marriage in order to secure the fundamental rights of spouse selection without any interference.

Shyamal Das in the work, “Transition in Garo’s marriage system: an observation” (2012) has argued that marriage is considered as a 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, clan, religions and regions. Indigenous people or tribal people 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 about the marriage system of *Garos* and various forces, which have made responsible for the transitions of their marriage system. It explains that the 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. In this article, the author’s idea is also relevant with the modernization part of this paper.

HITORY OF TAI KHAMYANG COMMUNITY:

The Tai *Khamyang* belong to an area called “*Khamjang*” which lies in the kachin state of Myanmar. This small unit of Tai *Khamyang* people migrated from “*Mueng Mao Lung Dynasty*” in upper Myanmar. It is said that the regions of upper Myanmar geographically have full of resources. The Kop dub River flow through this region and have plenty of gold in the form of sand. The Tai *Khamyang* resided for a long period in this area lying on the Kop dub river. So literally they were known by the name “*Khamyang*” or “the people having gold”.(Rajkhowa, 2013).According to Ahom chronicles, Prince Sukhapha and his followers were attacked by the Nagas at *Khamajang* on their way over Patkai. After his crossing over the Patkai, *Khamyangs* were driven away to take refuge in Assam under the oppression of *Siukhanpha*. It is that early settlements of the section of Noras who were subsequently known by the name. The Tai *Khamyangs*, in the patkai got divided into two groups namely the *Maan Loi* or *Dum Nora*. This settlement lays near the great lake “the lake of no return”. In the mid eighteenth century, due to the critical surrounding for the presence of couple of cobra in the lake and problem faced from the Kachin, the Tai *Khamyangs* crossed over the patkai hill and settled in a fertile valley of Arunachal Pradesh. It is said that they constructed a pagoda which is still present near the “no return lake”. In the later period, they maintained good relationships with the Tai *Khamtis* and established villages in Tengapani area. During the rule of Ahom king Gaurinath Singha, these Tai *Khamyang* people migrated to Jorhat district of Assam. With regard to their earlier migration to Assam, it may be noted that some Noras had accompanied *Swargadeo* Sukhapha and later on their separated identities were merged with the name *Khamyang*. History bears testimony to the fact that in 1524 *Swargadeo* Chukungmong married the daughter of the raja and equally was honored with a *Khamyang* damsel. It is quite probable that some Noras might have accompanied the princess in 1576. *Swargadeo* Chukhapha also married one Nora princess. The princess was accompanied by a Nora prince, a priest and 1000 Nora people.

Every community has different culture and also has different rituals and practices. *Khamyang* community also has their own culture, ritual and practice. Every community is based on kinship system, which binds people through blood and marriage system, which binds people together in group. The concept of kinship system started from 19th century. At first the colonial people studied about the administrative or native people and included kinship system as a social institution of society. Kinship has two types which are affinal kinship and consanguineous kinship. The bond of marriage is called as affinal kinship. This kinship system related through marriage and the bond of blood is called as consanguineous kinship. This kinship system is related through blood. (Brown, 1952)

Marriage is a very important institution in human society which permit man and woman to have a family life that is husband and wife. In *Khamyang* community, marriage system is an important part of their ritual and practices. Through the marriage system the people of *Khamyang* expand their kinship system.

KEY CONCEPT

Marriage System:

Marriage is one of the most important ceremonies in the circle of every community of the world. Marriage is a very important social institution. Besides procreation and peaceful conjugal lives, the human beings are attached closely with the society. Thus, marriage as an institution is an important social system for the welfare and discipline in the society. (Brahma2009:65).The beginning of a legitimate family is marked by a socially and culturally acceptable legally consummated union called marriage. The marriage institution is a common phenomenon present in every society; however there are difficulties defining the concept marriage. This difficulty largely arises from the variations of marriage arrangements that have been witnessed in different societies (Okodudu, 2010). In view of this, Farley (1994) defined marriage as a socially approved arrangement usually between a male and a female that involves an economic and sexual relationship. Beattie (1980), defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman such that the children to the woman are the recognized legitimate off spring of both partners. Smith and Preston (1982) on their part conceptualized marriage to be an enduring socially approved

sexual and economic relationship between at least two persons. A more acceptable definition of marriage was by Mike Murdock (1949 cf Ingiabuna et al. 2003) who defined marriage as the socially approved union of a sexual cohabiting pair called husband and wife through which the off springs derive their legitimacy. From the foregoing, it is deducible that the conventional definition of marriage is that it is a union between a man and a woman such that children born to the woman are recognized as legitimate offspring of both parents. However, Okodudu (2010) assert that the idea of marriage has changed in recent times. In much of the western European countries, marriage has been conceptualized as a union between two consenting adults irrespective of their sexes with or without approval from their parents of family; hence same sex marriages are being contracted today without the possibility of having children, except that it is a relationship between two consenting adults that has been recognized by law.

Significance of the Study.

Marriage is regarded an important event in the life of a Hindu man, because without a wife he cannot enter the “Ghrihastha Ashram” ordained by the holy law givers. Besides these, without marriage there can be no offspring and without a son, no release from the chain of birth-death-rebirth. Most cultures have religious reasons for getting married. A religious marriage can be a way for a couple to deepen their bonds to each other, as well as help them form a deeper relationship with god and receive his blessing. Moreover, marriage places a child in a suitable position in the society. From this angle, father is indispensable for the full status of a child and its mother. Society welcomes legitimate child, so that Malinowski calls marriage as “the licensing parenthood. Marriage system is also one of the parts of the Tai *Khamyang* community. Every community has some customs and traditions which they follow while retaining marriage system, but modernization is one of the most discouraging topics for present time as because of modernization different changes have been taking place in the cultures of different society, which has regulated the marriage system to retain either some of its traditional customs and rituals or lose certain others. Thus, this study will be an attempt to focus on the changes and continuity of marriage system in terms of religious aspect, traditional as well as institutional aspect. So, it will be significant to study about the marriage system among Tai *Khamyang* and try to find out its importance in their society.

***Pan Ona* Marriage System in Tai *Khamyang* Community:**

Marriage is a system which occupies an important part in anyone’s collective personal and social aspects of life. In *Khamyang* community the people usually marry within the community. The Tai *Khamyang* society regards arrange marriages as the most systematic one because of the involvement of the aged people in every ritual. Child marriage is obsolete in Tai *Khamyang* society but in distant past widow marriage was seen to be evident in this society. After the demise of the brother, the respective brother-in-law can marry his sister-in-law. However, it is not mandatory to do so. Although there is no restriction in polygamous marriage among the people of this society but there are many examples of multi-marriage cases which can be seen clearly. But inter caste marriages are acknowledged. (Rajkhwa, 2013) In establishing marital relationship, Tai *Khamyang* society mostly follows two distinct customs or methods. They are as follows (i) *Pan Lung*^h and (ii) *Pan Ona*. Another inclusive method is “*Chaoli*”. Marriage is a social union on legal contract between people that creates kinship. *Khamyang* society is basically patriarchal, the son inherits his father’s property. It is in this context, that the research work is an attempt to find out how marriage system helps to form kinship system and what rituals are associated with and what changes are that have occurred among the marriage system. Marriage is the foundational relationship for all societies and it also refers the institutional demands, rights, duties, amenities etc. Marriage system is also the institution that shapes the form of family, thereby making it as the base of a society. Several social prophets believe that marriage will lose its impact. And also several social prophets believe that living alone is becoming a more attractive alternative and that married people are gradually becoming less vulnerable to problems with their spouse. In support of this view, they refer to the growing number of single households in western nations and to the rising divorce rates. This idea of a

diminishing utility of marriage is widely spread. (Veenhoven, 1983). Now a day, it is seen that there are many problems associated with the marriage system like inter caste marriage and divorce. Traditional idea of marriage got decline and sometime some people think that marriage restricts the freedom of individual. In marriage system, culture and religious aspect is always associated with it. In Tai *Khamyang* community, the role of betel leaf along with area nut is quite remarkable. In terms of marriage, the groom's family has to bear a heavy burden and some responsibilities. The whole responsibility of hospitality which should be provided by the family of the bride is attributed to the family of the groom which is an important aspect of this study. In earlier time, unlike various societies, the people of *Khamyang* society consider the eggs of hens and ducks as a symbol of creation. Therefore boiled eggs of hens are proposed with the proposal to the bride's home. On the other hand, to offer an elder daughter to an elder son of a family is against the rules of astrology in *Khamyang* society. But nowadays, traditional idea of marriage system among Tai *Khamyang* community got declined. Thus, the present study will be an attempt to examine about the impact of changes and continuity on the traditional form of this marriage system and to look at whether the system has been able to retain its earlier significance with the changing period.

Conclusion

Tai *Khamyang* marriage was a traditional marriage system for, but nowadays it has been changing with the process of modernization. Thus this theory of tradition and modernity will be applied to look at the changes and continuity of Tai *Khamyang* marriage system in terms of modernization.

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