

Marriage System among the Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh

Ashan Riddi & Karabi Bharali

Marriage is an important and universal social institution because it ensures the continuation of the family and other groupings based on kinship. Sociologists and social anthropologists have developed some conceptual frameworks for studying marriage in human society. Defining marriage Westermarck, in his work 'A Short History of Human Marriage' writes:

'Marriage is a relation of one and more men and women which is recognized by custom and law and involves certain rights and duties both in the case of the parties entering the union and in the case of children born of it'¹

D. N. Majumdar and T N. Madan in their book 'An Introduction to Social Anthropology', write:

Marriage ensures a biological satisfaction [that of sex] and a psychological satisfaction [that of having children] on the individual plane, and on the wider collective plane, it ensures a two-fold survival, that of the group and its culture.²

David Pocock considered marriage as a social fact. He believed that "despite all illusion of freedom you will find, or have already found, your mate where society directed you to do so. Even if your marriage is statically unusual it is within the tolerated area of deviation."³

The people taken up here for discussion are the Tagins one of the major tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, who inhabit the upper course of SINIK (Subansiri River) in upper Subansiri district. They have common international border with the NYEME (Tibet) presently intersected by the McMahon Line.

The matrimonial relation is called *Nengne-Nida* and acquiring of the wife *Nyeme-Nanam*. Marriage is of great significance, though it has little sexual importance, for the Tagin. In the Tagin society, marriage has certain background of complexity such as social, economic, religious rite, rituals, etc.

After marriage husbands have exclusive rights over their wives. Married man could feel proud for acquiring wife, having issues, rearing family and ensuring continuity of his line of family. A man who could not acquire a wife is doomed to be less manly, economically weak and bound to be childless, and childless persons are considered as less fortunate and cursed. After death an unmarried man is supposed to cook his own semen and eat while journeying towards the Nilly-Moko. Thus, naturally, the man enjoys more status and better position in the society than unmarried man.

The society evolved certain norms that govern the marriage system in the society and in case of violation of such socially established norms besides social punishment, such person needs to undergo ritual purification involving sacrifices and compensation to woman's family. Throughout his life, such persons are debarred from taking part in any performance of rituals sacred meal, and normally avoided encountering animal from Tiger family. The Tagin society is divided up into groups of villages which are clan based for security and cooperation. The group of clan based villages maintain exogamy but they had intermarrying clans around their area. Normally, a mother's brother's daughter is considered ideal mate for man.

Marriage in the Tagin society is also an institution that creates alliance between the bride giver and bride recipient families. Payment of bride-price and performance of marriage rites and rituals are the forms of religious and social recognition of marriage in the society and union of two souls in spiritual world. Once, the bride price is paid the wife is considered as the property of the family and lineage. The lineage and clan solidarity is being-demonstrated in acquiring wives. Members of lineage and clan contributes for payment of bride price. By paying bride price, the groom's side asserted their rights over woman and by accepting bride price bride's relatives undertake to defend the sons in-law their children, especially bride from injustice and any harassment.

* The Tagins believes in the existence of the three categories of the worlds: *Nia-Mpko/Tani-Moko* [world of Living], *Donyi-Polo-Moko* [world of gods & goddesses] and *Poha-Moko/Uyi-Orom-Moko* [world of spirit and dead]. *Nia-Moko/Tani-Mokp* [material world] is where all living being exist. *Donyi-Polo-Moko* [world of gods and goddesses] is believed to be above the *Nia-Moko*. It is belief, again, the *Poha-Moko* is divided into two worlds: *Nyili-Moko*, where soul of natural and normal dead person and spirits are living below the earth. Other is the *Tali-Moko* where the spirit and soul of murdered, accidental death and unnatural dead are living Above.

In the Tagin society, a man must give cattle, meat and local drink for bride, a man with more cattle than another can have several wives whereas a man with few cattle can have only one. Only man who has accumulated more grain, cattle, pig etc. will find girl for his son those who can reciprocate with gifts if not according to his own scale but substantial part of the bride gift. Thus, getting a son married off thus imposes heavy burden, both material and emotional, on a father. A father who fails to buy a wife for his son might be looked down whereas, a wealthy father who can arrange marriage for his son and perform big marriage ceremonies feel proud. Thus, unlike other society, problem is more acute for fathers at lowest economic levels searching wives for their sons.

i. Arranged Marriage

Marriage takes place after the negotiation between the parents of the boy and of the girl, which is called *Nengne-Nida* in general. Marriage is settled after negotiation between the groom's party and bride's party.⁴ The parents start searching for suitable mate for their son just after his birth. Because, parents are morally obliged to find and buy a partner for their son. Otherwise, the parents are subjected to social humiliation. Usually hard working girls with good family background or old matrimonial relatives are preferred. When they find a suitable girl, the parents of boy along with the *Nyitom-Penko* (mediator) meet the parents of the girl to offer proposal for their daughter. If the two parties agree, the marriage proposal is confirmed through the examination of the chicken and pig livers. If the livers fore-tells the good fortune of the union, the boy's parents present mithuns, pig, meat, rice-bear etc, to mark beginning of matrimonial relation between two families. The girl's parents reciprocate this gesture with traditional valuable items such as Tibetan bell, Tibetan sword, etc. However, such exchange depends upon the economic position of both the families. Thus, for example, Nalo Nyobin's wife, the prospective bridegroom [her son] and groom's brother brought carcass of domestic pig to Mra Tabe for the betrothal of Tabe's daughter to Nyobin's son. Tabe presented carcass to S M Krishnatry, that Krishnatry utilised for refreshment to a community feast to his team and Tabe's relatives to celebrate the betrothal.⁵ Sailo wrote :

Marriage is normally arranged among the well-to-do people when boys and girls are quite young but the girls go to their husbands only when all the prices are paid up.⁶

If the betrothed girl finds that her fiancée has fallen in love with some other girl and has actually married someone else, she feels let down. If the betrothed girl is married to some other person the girl's parents or he who actually married her has to pay back the bride price to the boy's family with extra mithun. This happened to Yadik, daughter of Mra Tabe, whose bride price meat was presented to S M. Krishnatry by Tabe. Later on, Yadik despite her betrothal with Nalo Nyobin's son married Roliana Hmar,⁷ Area Superintendent, who succeeded S M. Krishnatry at Lemeking in June 1956.⁸ In 1986, Shri Tani Riddi fell in love with Yapu Bator who was betrothed to Tania Yekar (late). Thus, after much contention, Political Assistant and Political Interpreters settled the case at Daporijo Kebang Gor⁹ and Tani Riddi was allowed to marry Yapu Bator by paying extra mithun to Tania Yekar.¹⁰

ii. Child Marriage

Child marriage was commonly practiced among the Tagin; the boy or the girl is married off at the tender age. A boy and girl may be formally engaged at any age, sometimes while child is in the womb of their mother. Often, the young girl was married to a man quite older to her. Marriage negotiation takes place while the child is in the womb of the mother and such a practice is called the *Nepe-Nida*; In April 1956, Mara Taye killed Takin (wild animal) and its meat was given to Nguju Tank to arrange the child marriage of his son to Tank's daughter. Therefore, Geeta wrote that :

'The main carcass was being carried by 5 men to Nguju village for presentation to Nguju Tarik's daughter who was to be betrothed to Tayee's son (both under teens')¹¹

The parents would get their daughter married on their own choice. H S. Butalia in his tour diary on Sippi valley noted regarding child marriage that :

In the evening the wife of the newly appointed G. B. Nili DERRI [sic] of Railu Aiou came to see me along with her daughter who has been promised to the old man RAGBI DESA... This practice of child marriage was very noticeable in the Sippi Valley.¹²

The duration of intervening period between betrothal and final marriage ceremony depends upon the economic status of both the

parents. If the boy dies, the younger brother of the deceased has the right to marry the betrothed girl. If the betrothed girl dies, her sister is asked to marry the betrothed boy. This practice sometimes leads to deterioration of the tie. It is seen that if the boy is younger and the girl is mature and if she elopes with other boy that leads to aggressive quarrel. It is also observed that often the boy or the girl refuses to marry the opposite partner. If the girl refuses to marry, both her kins and boys' party forcefully capture her, then one of her legs is put inside the hole made in a heavy wooden plank to prevent running away known as *Lepia-Legnam*. Dudum Lida (late) was betrothed to Dupak Nguki during childhood. However, in later age Dudum refused to marry him and chose another man. Thus, in mid 1970s, her kins and in-laws forcefully captured her and kept her in confinement. However, brawl between betrothed boy and girl resulted in the death of the girl.¹³ Child marriage is also responsible for the early widowhood of the women: because the young girl is often married off to old man who usually dies after few years.

iii. Love marriage

Love marriage called *Kasom-Sinam* is a common phenomenon in the Tagin society. As there was no medium to communicate their love to each other, the boy approaches the girl through mediator or personally and this practice is called *Nyeme-Pignam*.

If the girl agrees to the proposal, then they inform their respective parents about their affairs. Generally, the boy brings the girl to his parents' house and requests them to pay off the material to the parents of the brides. If both parents accept the proposal, the bride price is paid after negotiation. In case of the disagreement by any of the party, the boy elopes with his beloved. At last, the parents are compelled to accept. If the girl is betrothed or already married, the situation becomes complicated. In such case the parents of the girl have to return, the bride price received, to the earlier party.

iv. Forced marriage

Forced marriage can be defined as the kidnapping of a girl or woman forcing her to marry a man against her will. Nevertheless, such marriage seldom takes place. Usually the girl and her parents are offered marriage proposal by the boy's party. If either the girl or her parents refuse the proposal, the boy's party resorts to kidnapping. There was one case of

attempt at forced marriage in Sippi valley in 1957 when Col. Butalia was exploring the valley. Russi Budh of Deke village had promised his daughter's marriage to Hinju Dagio of Hinju village, who had only partly paid for her price. Meanwhile, Gumsar Sado asked Budh to marry her to him. This offer was refused. One day Gumsar Sado abducted the girl from the fields and kept her in his house for one day before she could be recovered. Butalia asked Sado to settle the difference at Kebang, but Sado's adamant attitude led to his arrest by Butalia.¹⁴

v. Marriage by Exchange

The Tagins have another peculiar type of the marriage system called *Nyeme-Liknam* (exchange-marriage). In this form, usually two men exchange their sisters. For this kind of marriage also all the usual marriage ceremonies are to be performed by both the families. In such case, the marriage is solemnised through mutual understanding.

vi Nyiamgio

When a betrothed girl falls in love with someone else and finally married her lover the marriage is called *Nyiamgio*. Because of the tradition of the child marriage it frequently happens that young girls dislike their betrothed man who is older or if same age disliking his looks for other man of her choice. This often led to blood feud and warfare between the lover and fiancée during olden days. The deprived fiancée felt offended and exerted all might against his opponent to take back the runaway wife. If the fiancée party agreed for reimbursement of the material it paid, the women's husband has to pay the double price.

vii. Levirate

A widow in the Tagin society is allowed to remarry if she so desires. When the husband dies, his brother irrespective of age inherits his wife. Since the family had paid the bride price, the widow becomes the property of the deceased brother. If the deceased has no brother, the lineage brother asserts the right and inherits the widow. The widow cannot choose to marry some one else other than the brother of deceased husband. If some one marries her without the consent of legal heir, he has to pay the *Nyamdum* (returns of bride-price). If the widow does not want to marry, she may remain as widow rest of her life.

viii. Sororate

The practice of sororate has social sanction but is not practised as a rule. Sororate polygamy is rare and circumstantial. A man marries sister of his wife, when the wife is alive not as a matter of right but as a matter of bearing child if the wife has no issue. If a wife dies, husband may marry her sister but not as a matter of right and compulsory form of inheritance. It is possible only with the consent of the deceased wife's sister and parents. The sister of the deceased wife is not regarded as a substitute, rather this is considered a new marriage and regular rites and rituals are performed.¹⁶

ix. Polygamy

Monogamy is the general practice among the Tagins. However, there is no restriction against polygamy. Such people usually have more than one wife as they could afford to pay the bride price. K T. Khuma noted that :

Husband is at liberty to take more than one wife and there are cases where a man takes as many as four wives even.¹⁷

While Sailo wrote: Polygamy is widely practised, but a man seldom has more than four wives.¹⁸

Table No. 1
Case of Polygamous Marriage in sample villages

S. N.	Village	Name of person with education status and occupation	No. of wife
1	A	i Nyato Marde, PUC, Ex. Zila Parishad Member, business	2
		ii Komda Marde. Matric. Business	2
		iii Kege Marde. Illiterate. farmer	4
2	B	i Taning Nayom, undergraduate. Assistant teacher	2
		ii Tabin Nayom. illiterate. gam bura. farmer	2
3	C	i Nyode Byaching, illiterate. Political Interpreter	3
		ii Takar Byaching, illiterate. Political Interpreter	2

Source: Computed on the basis of data collected from field

The first wife is called *Hete* and the second is called *Hessi*. There is no restriction in the matter of the number of wives. To them having many wives was a status symbol in the society, because only rich man can afford to marry more than one wife.

x. Divorce

If the wife happens to be unworthy because of barrenness, quarrelsome and has indication of maintaining adulterous relation with others; or unable to discharge her domestic duties, etc. she is asked to go back to her parent's house. In such case, *Nyeme-Arr* [bride price] is paid back to the man after a discount from the original price by her parents or the man who married her. If a husband proved to be lazy, incompetent or if he ill-treats his wife for no fault of her the wife may divorce her husband. Nevertheless, while doing so she has to return the bride price.

xi. Change

Although forced marriage has disappeared because modern law does not permit such practice, yet not much change has taken place in other types of the marriages. The uneducated rural population are still practising child marriage though love marriage is commonly practised among the educated youth.¹⁹ Polygamy is still prevalent among the former, but there are also cases of polygamy among the educated class. Payment of the bride price is still considered as very significant in the Tagin society. Because payment of bride price morally binds upon both the husband and the wife, to stay together as former has paid her price and it is a kind of social recognition of the marriage. So, there is less possibility of divorce. However, a new kind of payment for bride price has been included [cash]. Earlier the marriage was confined within the Tagins themselves or at the most with neighbouring tribes like the Nyishis, Galos and Hill Miris. Now, a new trend has already started to marry girl from the plains and other distance tribes. There are cases of the Tagins marrying girls from Nepali, Muslim, Assamese, Mizos and other communities like the Khamptis, Nocte, etc, vice-versa in the case of Tagin girls too. In case of such marriage, no bride price is either taken or given.

Notes and References

1. Quoted in S L .Doshi & P C. Jain *Social Anthropology*, Rawat Publications, Jaipur and New Delhi, 2001, p. 2000.
2. *Ibid.*
3. David Pocock. *Understanding Social Anthropology*, The Athlione Press, London& New Brunswicky New Jersey, 1996, p.72
4. K S. Singh, *People of India. Annmachal Pradesh*, Vol-.xiv, Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta, 1995, Pp. 308- 2
5. S.M. Krishnatry, *Gender Triumphs Unarmed in the Hostile Gorges: Re-discovery of Border Tagins (Tour Diary of Mrs. Geeta Krishnatry)*, ed, B B. Pandey, Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar, 1997, p. 153
6. L R. Sailo, *Reports and Tour Diary on an Exploratory Tour Undertaken in the Upper Subansiri Area and the Tsari Chu Valley During January-March, 1951*, State Archive, Itanagar, P. 18
7. S M. Khrisnatry, *op. cit.*, p. 185
8. *ibid.* p. 186
9. A house for settling case and dispute
10. As narrated by Tani Riddi, village Riddi, December 8, 2001
11. S M. Khrisnatry, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-4
12. H. S. Butalia, *Tour Diary of If S. Butalia, Addl. Political Officer: Subansiri hrontier Division: Daporijo, State, Archive, Itanagar, F. No. R. 139/57, p. 7*
13. Collected from the field.
14. H.S. Butalia, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-17.
15. Data collected from field work.
16. *Ibid.*
17. K T. Khuma Tour Diary November-December, 1951, Assam Government Press, Shillong, 1953 p. 6.
18. LR. Sailo *Op. cit* P. 18.
19. During the field works it was found that 15 girs below age of 10 years in the sample villages have been married, but staying at their parent's house.