



Marriage System of the Bodos

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ABSTRACT

Marriage, a legally and socially sanctioned union, between man and women, that is regulated by laws, rules, customs, beliefs and attitudes that prescribe the rights and duties of the partners and accord status to their offspring. Marriage creates new social relationships and reciprocal rights between the spouses, between each and the kin of the other and establishes what will be the rights and status of the children when they are born. The universality of marriage within different societies and cultures is attributed to the many basic social and personal functions for which it provides structure, such as sexual gratification and regulation and consumption and satisfaction of personal needs for affection, status and companionship. Perhaps its strongest function concerns procreation, the care of children and their education, socialization and regulation of lines of descent.

Marriage is the social means to widen and strengthen the network of social relation in the society. It is one of the most important social institutions of all the societies of the world. Marriage is considered as sacred. Like other societies the marriage ceremony is very important ceremony in the life-cycle of the Bodos. In Bodo, 'Marriage' is called 'Haba'. The word 'ha' means soil or earth and 'ba' means to bear the soil or the responsibility of the earth on the back.

So far marriage is concerned monogamy is the prevalent system of marriage in the Bodo society. Only with some exceptional cases like when the first wife proves childless, the Bodo custom sanctions taking a second wife mainly with a view to begetting children and thereby handing down the father's name to posterity. Marriage takes place after both sexes gain full maturity as a result of inclination of the families. The Bodos have very high regard for chastity and they live by it. In the words of Sydney Endle, "The

standard of chastity among the Kocharis, both man and women, is by no means a low one. As a rule young people in the villages' at least lead pure lives before marriage and faithful to their marriage vows (...)" Adultery is considered as sin and serious offence and people committing adultery are inflicted with severe punishment according to social rules.

Traditionally the Bodos have as many as six types of marriage. These are

1. *Swngnanwi Lainai Haba* (Arranged marriage):-This type of marriage is the most common socially accepted marriage of the Bodos. This type of marriage is held with mutual consent and agreement of both the parties and it is arranged by the social norms and customs. Therefore normally this type of marriage is celebrated with great solemnity and honour. Till the recent past, decision of parents or guardians was given priority than the choice of the boys and girls who were dependent on their parents.

2. *Gurja Lakhinai Haba* (Obtaining groom by service):- This type of marriage is rather rare; however it does take place. This type of marriage is celebrated when in a family there are only daughters and there are no sons or male members to inherit the family property. In this type of marriage the bridegroom has to work at the house of bride before marriage. But this type of marriage is rarely seen in the present society.

3. *Kharsonnai Haba* (Girls flee away to boy's house):- This marriage takes place when there is a delay in the arrangement of the marriage or the parents are not happy with the bride. In this uncertain situation after a mutual agreement between the young boy and girl enters into the house of the boy. The consent of the parents is not taken into consideration. The formal marriage takes place after the bride price is settled. This is an irregular form of marriage.

4. *Bwanwi Lainai Haba* (Marriage by capture):- In this type of marriage the bride is forcefully taken away from the house of bride to the house of bridegroom and then the marriage takes place. This marriage is called marriage by capture or *Bwanwi Lainai Haba*. This type of marriage was prevalent in the earlier days. But at present this type of marriage has been completely discarded from the Bodo society.

5. *Dwnkharlangnai Haba* (Elopement marriage):-This type of marriage is not socially recognized and yet it takes place in the Bodo society. The mutual understanding between the bride and bridegroom is enough for this type of marriage. It is also regarded as an irregular marriage by the Bodo society.

6. *Dongkha Habnai Haba* (Co-habitation marriage):- This system of marriage is approved by the Bodo society. If a man comes and live with a widow, and if the society recognises this co-habitation, then the man and woman should regularise the marriage according to the social custom called *Dongkha Habnai*. This system of marriage is very rare.

Widow Re-marriage:-

In the Bodo society re-marriage is socially recognized as regular marriage. A widow can re-marry any person who is not related to her. However, she loses the authority on the property of her deceased husband. The male child is always entitled to get the property of his father. Sometimes, it is seen that the widow is allowed to take the female child of her deceased husband along to her new husband. A widower may remarry his deceased wife's younger sister, but not the elder, whom he is obliged conventionally to guard as mother. Similarly, a widow may re-marry her deceased husband's younger brother, but she is not allowed to marry the elder brother of her deceased husband.

The Traditional System of Marriage or Hathasuni Khurnai:-

The traditional system of marriage of the Bodo is called *Hathasuni Khurnai*. This form of marriage is very simple. In this system both the bride and the groom are seated in front of Bathou, the alter of Siva in the courtyard, and a Douri (priest) recites mantra invoking Siva and other deities and declares that the bride and bridegroom have been wedded to each other and from that day they are entitled to co-habit as husband and wife. As a ritual, the bride cooks rice and curry prepared with rice powder and chicken without applying spice or turmeric, which is called *Ondlakhari*. The bride offer a little portion of the meal to the household god and goddess of Ishing (the innermost room of the main house, *nomano*) on banana leaves and the Douri recites mantras introducing the bride to gods and goddesses. Then they pray to god Bathou Bwrai to grant them a peaceful conjugal life. The bride promises to lead a happy conjugal life by touching the rice kept in earthen container. Then the bride serves a little portion of rice and curry to the bridegroom and the villagers present. Then the Douri and village elders give advice to the new couple about the duties and responsibilities towards the family and society. Then the main function of the marriage or *Hathasuni Khurnai* comes to an end. The marriage function is followed by a grand feast, which was continued for seven days in earlier days. During those days rice-beer and pork are the most important items of the feast and they were supplied in abundance. During the feast man and women, both young and old, enjoyed together by dancing, singing and playing traditional musical instruments in the marriage. The villagers irrespective of sex and age enjoyed by singing, dancing and playing traditional musical instruments in the marriage.

Marriage according to the Brahma Dharma:-

Since the first decade of 20th century thousands of Bodos embraced Brahma Dharma under the guidance of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma; consequently the new system of marriage came into existence in the society. The new religion has not only brought a great change in the pre and post marriage ceremony but it has also refined the old customs to suit the new religion. The use of rice-beer and pork on the day of wedding was totally discouraged and now the use of liquor has been replaced by tea. Tea becomes one of the most important items to entertain guests in the wedding ceremony, nowadays.

Unlike the traditional marriage there is no prevalence of dancing or singing in the Brahma marriage. Modern ban party has taken the place of traditional music. The bridegroom party is given a ceremonial welcome at the gate of the house along with the music of the ban party. The bridegroom stands on the *Gambari Khamplai* (a low sitting tool made of wooden plank of gambari wood) and the younger sister or cousin of the bride washes his feet and puts perfumed oil and cosmetics on bridegroom's hair and face and combs his hair. The bride groom, in return gives a small present to his new sister-in-law as a token of love.

The main function of the marriage is performed at night. In accordance with the Hindu calendar a *Subha logno* (sacred time) is fixed for the performance of *Yajnahuti or Ahuti*. The bride and bridegroom are taken from the main house to the Mandap (the place of yajna) by cheering and playing band. The main function of the wedding starts with the *Purohit* (priest) chanting *Gayatri Mantra*, facing eastward in front of the fire of the yajna; the mantra is followed by the father of the bride, the bridegroom and the bride.

Keeping the fire as witness, the father of the bride makes '*Ashirbad*' (Sanskrit, asirvada i.e., blessing) on his daughter and bridegroom. And they pray for the blessing of god for the new couple. The relatives and friends of both the bride and bride groom offer blessings in the form of presentations of articles, ornaments or cash. At the very outset, the parents of the bride offer blessings, while they are followed by others. After *ashirbad* function is over, the purohit concludes the main function of the marriage with a few slogans in the name of Brahma invoking blessings to the newly married couple.

The follower of Brahma dharma introduced a new system of marriage in the Bodo society. At present this system of marriage is not confined only to the followers of Brahma Dharma but even the followers of the traditional Bathou dharma and other Hindu cult of Bodo perform yajnahuti in the matter of wedding.

Bride-Price and Dowry:-

The system of realization of bride price has been customarily followed in the Bodo society. It is called *Phon taka* (bride price) in Bodo language. Demand of phon taka (bride price) was compulsory tradition of the society. But in the present days bride price has almost disappeared; it is now practiced as ritual. In the prevailing customs, the father of the bride offers a nominal price of a pair of areca nuts, betel leaves and a pair of one rupee coins on a banana leaf to bride's father. The father of the bride accept the areca nuts, betel leaves only and returns the coins.

Malsa: -

There is another system of collecting *Malsa* from the parents of the bridegroom. The rates of *Malsa* differ from place to place. In some villages *Malsa* is realized to the tune of Rs.2.50 (Rupees two and fifty paise) and in some villages it is realized at 5.00 (Rupees five).

Kholar Gothainai:-

In Bodo marriage custom, if the husband expires suddenly after the marriage, the bride returns to her parents and the amount of 'Malsa'(bride price) is given back to the parents of the deceased husband by the parents of bride. This act of returning of the bride and 'Malsa' is known as '*Kholar Gothainai*'.

Mamai mara:-

If the bride groom or the parents of the bridegroom had not paid the phon taka (bride price) at the time of marriage and if the bride had expired leaving female child behind, the phon taka or the bride price of the female would go to her uncle at the time of her marriage. This system is known as *Mamai mara*.

Athmongal:-

On the eight day from the day of marriage, the bride and bridegroom come to bride's house for the post marriage ceremony known as '*Athmongal*'. In the traditional society the bridegroom brings cocks, goat or pig in honour of his father-in-law's family and relatives. *Athmongal* is a very brief ceremony and limited feast is arranged on the occasion. Only a few selected friends and relatives are invited to the ceremony. After the ceremony the bride and bridegroom return home along with the articles of presentation which they received from their friends and relatives on the occasion of their marriage ceremony together with the articles presented by the parents of the bride. The bride also takes away all her belongings from her parents' house.

Divorce: - In the Bodo society divorce is allowed. But there must be valid ground to satisfy the society for divorce. As per Bodo society is concerned divorce or separation is very rare. If both husband and wife desire to get divorce, they have to appear before the 'Bodo Samaj' or village headman for their settlement. If both the couple desires to separate each other, then it is performed by tearing a betel leaf. This is called *Pathoi-lai bisinai*. The betel-leaf is kept in the presence of the village elders in the house of the 'Gaoburah' (village head man) and then betel-leaf is torn into two pieces. By this act the marriage bond of the couple comes to an end. Thus the couple can part from each other peacefully. It is a symbolic act which indicates that the torn leaf can never reunite, so there married life is severed for ever. But if the husbands divorce his wife without valid ground, the husband has to bear the responsibility of her livelihood for a certain period of time and he must also pay certain amount of fine for his freedom to the divorced woman and the village committee. On the other hand, if divorce occurs due to unfaithfulness of the wife, the husband is entitled to recover the amount of money he spent for the marriage from the parents of the bride. When the amount is paid to the man, the woman is at liberty to live with a new husband.

Female Chastity in the Bodo Society:-

Pre-martial relationship is strictly prohibited in the Bodo society; female chastity is considered to be the major qualification for marriage. If one does indulge in pre-marital sex, she is subjected to physical punishment at the time of trial in the village court. Then she is required to undergo ritual purification along with religious function. As such the young people of the society lead pure lives before marriage.

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