



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

MARRIAGE SYSEM AMONG THE TOTOLA RABHAS: A BRIEF STUDY

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Abstract:

Marriage is a social union or legal contract between people that create new social relationship. It is an approval social pattern whereby a male and a female can enjoy certain rights and having responsibility towards each other. Marriage is performed by every socio-ethnic group by observing various customs and traditions. Like other socio-ethnic group, the Totola Rabhas are also performed the marriage ceremony with special and formal social customs. The marriage festivities are given lots of importance by them. They believes that through marriage a couple of marriageable man and woman permit to set up a new world of their own for creating offspring for the longevity of existence of the community itself. The main purpose of the present paper is to examine the traditional marriage systems of the Totola Rabhas as well as the procedures from beginning to end of the marriage.

Keywords: Rabha, Totola Rabha, marriage, customs, tradition.

1.1 Introduction:

The Rabhas are considered one of the major tribes of Assam. They are descendants of Indo-Mongoloid group and fall under Tibeto-Burman group of languages of the Sino-Tibetan language family. They were recognized as one of the plain scheduled tribes by the constitution of India. They are concentrated in Assam, Meghalaya and West Bengal. At present the Rabhas of Assam are mostly concentrated in Goalpara district and also scattered in Kamrup, Udalguri, Baksa, Kokrajhar, Nowgang etc. They are a distinct tribe having their own culture, customs, tradition, religious believes, traditional dress and ornaments etc. They had been playing a powerful role by contributing to the growth and development of the culture and tradition of the greater Assamese nation. The Rabhas have different sub groups having dialects. They are Pati, Rongdani, Maitari, Koch, Dahari, Bitalia, Totola and Hana. Totola Rabha is a sub group of Rabha tribes of Assam and inhabiting mostly in Udalguri and Baksa district of Assam. Sidney Endle observes in his book, The Kacharis (p-83): “The name of this tribe (Rabhas) is of

uncertain derivation and this district (Darrang) the people themselves are sometimes called Totolas, which may perhaps be a nickname.” The Totola Rabha society is mainly a patriarchal society. The male member is the head of the family, the female child moves out of her family at the time of her marriage. Their rites and rituals, and socio cultural practices are slight different from the rest of the other Rabha sub-groups. In this regard, the marriage system of the Totola Rabhas is to a slight different from the rest.

1.2 Objectives of the study: The study has been taken with the following objectives-

- (i) To study about the marriage systems of the Totola Rabha tribes of Assam.
- (ii) To study the procedures of marriage from beginning to end.

1.3 Methodology: This study has been conducted in two Totola Rabha villages of Udalguri district, viz., Rangajuli and Chewni. Both primary and secondary data are used for this paper. For collecting primary data, field work has been conducted in the study villages. Observation and interview method has been adopted in the field study. For collecting secondary data, books, journals and internet sources were studied.

2. Discussion:

Marriage has occupied the important position like of all the customary festivities connected with the life cycles of the human being. According to Westermarck, marriage can be defined, “as a relation of one or more men and women which is recognized by custom or law, and involves certain rights and duties both in the case of the children of it.” In Totola Rabha society, marriage is considered as an important institution in an individual’s life for procreation and continuance of social unit. They performed marriage not for biological needs but also for social, cultural and economic necessities. Their recognized system of marriage is monogamy. However, having two or more wives are also not uncommon. Exogamy, endogamy and polygamy marriages are seen among them. Although polygamy is not appreciated, socially it is not taboo. In that context, only the first wife is given institutional recognition. But marriage is prohibited within same family. There is no strict rule regarding dowry system. Generally, the Totola Rabha families are patriarchal in structure, so, they follow the patrilocal rule of residence after marriage. But, the matrilineal rule of residence is also followed in cases where the son-in-law decides to stay for lifetime into the household of the bride. The system of marriage practices of the Totola Rabhas can be divided into seven systems, viz. a) *poka biya or hamajik biya*, b) *gharjeya biya*, c) *dhoka biya* d) *topola biya*, e) *tokon biya*, f) *log kheda biya* g) *baillyo biya*. (*Bhupen rabha, Folk narratives of totola rabha*)

2.1 Poka biya (Marriage by negotiation): This system of marriage is recognised as standard form of marriage by the Totola Rabha society. Generally the marriage is arranged through consultation by the guardians of the boy and the girl. The first approach is made by the boy’s party. The date of marriage will be fixed if both the parties agree to the proposal. Marriage is celebrated with socially observing all the rituals, honor, merry making and feasting. The traditional way of getting marriage through negotiations is a long process. From the time of selecting the bride to the post marital ceremony of the marriage, three stages have to be crossed. These are- (a) pre-marital preparation (b) the marriage proper (c) the post- marital ceremony.

2.1.1 Pre- marital preparation:

The pre marriage ceremony starts with look for a bride through the mediator or their close friends and relatives by the parents of the bridegroom. After getting information about bride, the parents of the bridegroom go to the home of the chosen girl and disclose the reason of their visit. The parents of the bridegroom took with them rice- beer, betel nuts and leaves and lime. The parents of the proposed bride don't give their opinion at the first approach. So, the mediator tries to persuade the parents of the bride. After two families consent, both families decide to precede the next step. A day is fixed for *barbhar* ceremony. On the day of *Barbhar*, the parents of bridegroom, their relatives and the villagers including *Barua* and *Baruani* go to the bride's home by carrying areca nuts, betel leaves, rice beer, lime, bidis and so on. The *barua* and *baruani* has to cut the areca nuts and betel leaves and distribute compulsorily among the assembled people. So, this ceremony is also known as *Tamul-pan kata*. A good quantity of rice beer is consumed by both parties.

The Totola Rabhas prefer the months of *magh*(Jan-Feb), *Fagun*(Feb-March) and *Bohag*(April-May) as prosperous month for marriage and consequently fix the date.

The day before the marriage ceremony, the bridegroom's family sends certain special things to the bride's residence. It consisted of areca nuts, betel leaves, ornaments, clothing oil, vermilion etc. This is called *Telar-bhar* and also called *jurun* in some places. In some areas, this ceremony is performed on the actual day of wedding ceremony.

2.1.2 The marriage proper:

The marriage proper ceremony is the most important part of whole ceremony and it takes place in the evening time with the assembled villagers. The marriage function may be celebrated either in the house of the bride or the bridegroom. The bride is being carried on marriage hall by her brother-in-law. The bride is seated to the north and the groom is seated to south on facing east towards *mandop*. The priest begins the marriage function by chanting the mantra. The bridegroom applies vermilion on the forehead of the bride and exchange of garland each other and recitation of mantras of the marriage on the occasion. The couples make their promises in front of God that they will love, comfort, honour and protect their partner as long as they both shall live. After completion all the ritual, the parents and relative members bless the newly married couple and offered gift. The newly married couple seeking blessings from parents, relatives and the assembled village elders by touching their feet.

2.1.3 The post-marital ceremony:

The post marriage ceremony is known as *aathmongla* among the Totola Rabhas. This ceremony is celebrated at the house of the bride's parents on eight days after the wedding ceremony. The newlywed couple along with their friend pays a visit to the bride's home. This ceremony is celebrated very brief with only a few selected persons and no big feast is arranged on the occasion. The marriage ceremony is concluded with this function.

2.2 Gharjeya biya (Keeping son-in law): This system of marriage is recognised by the Totola Rabha society since early times. All the customs are observed like those in the social marriage. If in a family there is no other children except a girl then the parents marry off their daughter to a person and keep him with their family after all the formalities are over in the presence of the society. The consent of the boy's parents is necessary if the parents are alive.

2.3 Dhoka biya (Widow re-marriage): This system of marriage is approved by the Totola Rabha society. If a husband dies just a few days after the marriage, the widow may marry another man and if a wife dies in a very short time the widower may also marry another woman. Sometimes it is also seen that the marriage is solemnized between a widow and a widower. In this marriage elaborate ceremony is not allowed customarily. Certain simple rules are observed

2.4 Topola biya(Girls flee away to boy's home): This type of marriage is happen if two young boy and girl fall in love and want to marry and this might not be acceptable to the parents of the girl, then without informing her parents the girl enters to the boy's home before the settlement and start living with his family. Sometimes it also happens if the boy delay to marry the girl, at that moment the girl flee away to the boy's home.

2.5 Tokon biya (Marriage by capture): This type of marriage is not very common among the Totola Rabhas. In rare occasion, if a boy like a girl, but the girl does not give her consent, then as revenge, she is kept by the boy on her way to any place or from her home and forcefully marry her. No wedding rites and rituals are observed in such marriage.

2.6 Log kheda biya: This system of marriage was solemnised in early days. Where women forcefully captured by a man on her way to any place or catching fish and marries her and her children is also taken with her. The children come along with their mother start living with their new father's home, since this type of marriage is called as *log kheda biya*.

2.7 Baillyo biya (Child marriage): *Baillyo biya* was prevalent among the Totola Rabha at past. In the present time this form of marriage is no longer in practice. Due to impact of modern education among the Totola Rabhas, marriage in childhood is regarded as social offence.

3. Bride price: There is a custom of taking bride's price by the groom's family in the Totola Rabha society. According to this custom the groom's family has to pay some amount of money to the father of the bride and the village council. Among them whether the marriage is arrange marriage, marriage by capture, the bride price must be paid to the father of the bride. The amount may be fifty to one hundred to five hundred rupees but it varies from area to area. Moreover, bride price system is also prevalent among the Bodos, Dimasa and the Deoris since long time.

4. Dowry system: Like all other tribal societies of Assam, dowry system has not also prevailed in the Totola Rabha society. The groom's family cannot demand anything from the bride's family. Rather the bride's side enjoys more importance and can demand necessary provisions for the marriage festivities.

5. Divorce: Divorce is allowed in the Totola Rabha society, but it is rarely seen. If both husband and wife desire divorce mutually or either individually (husband or wife), the intending couple shall have to lodge the complaint before the village headman, and the village elders. The village council holds a meeting and takes consent from husband and wife and decides to separate them by following the traditional process called *pan-sira* (Tearing betel leaf). A betel leaf is given to hold and asked them to tear the betel leaf. The couple then tears the betel leaf in two pieces. From that day, the spouse is considered to be separated or divorced.

6. Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it came to know that marriage is one of the important universal social institutions. The marriage systems of the Totola Rabha society is unique and has distinctive featured. With the emergence of the modern education, western culture, civilization and contact with neighboring community changes has taken place in marriage. *Poka biya* is still prevalent in the society with slight differences from the previous one. *Dhoka biya*, *gharjeya biya*, *tokon biya* and *topola biya* are rarely seen among them. Now, *log kheda biya* and *baillyo biya* have disappeared from the Totola Rabha society. Although the dowry system has not prevailed in the society, but in present time, the parents gives some gifts like furniture, utensils and other household items to their daughter .

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