

Marriage System and Status of Women in tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh: A Study of Memba Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

The marriage is an important institution in Memba society which maintained the line of the family and kinship, which regulate proper relation between man and woman. It is through marriage that one could beget child for continuation of kinship line, provide more labour force to work in the field and contributing prosperity in economic condition of the family. The marriage is looked upon as a sacred bond, which requires a very complicated religious ceremony and preparation. The Memba people generally practice clan exogamy and tribe endogamy. They strictly prohibit marriage among the same clan and are forbidden among the person with a paternal ancestor. The provision of parallel and cross cousin marriage is permissible where marriage with son of mother's brother or with daughter of father's sister often takes place. the marriage outsider their migii (tribe) was not practiced earlier, because the Memba people being Buddhist thought themselves to be superior then their neighbouring tribes like Ramos, Pailibos, Bori and Bokars. On the other hand the later (Tribes) who followed animist also consider it a taboo to marry the people from Memba tribe who follow different religion.† However, in present day inter-tribe marriage are seen in the Memba community. The monogamy is the general form of marriage in the Memba society.*

Arrange Marriage (Chang-Sey)

The Memba used to follow two types of *Chang-Sey* in earlier days. In the first one, the family already in advance fixes the marriage of their child. They even fixed before the birth of their children and when the fixed girl child attained marriageable age the family of the boy visits the girl's house. In this system they perform the process called *Kham-gha*, where they gave girl family an amount of ghee, lamp and other gifts. During the *Kham-gha*, the boy family declares *Mon-tak-Dirla-Yuwa-kur* which means that from now onwards the girl is the property of their son and their relation is also now like a sword attached with its handle. After *Kham-gha*, for any reason whatsoever if the girl family decides not to send her in the boy's family then they had to pay very huge compensation in the form of money, domestic animal and in some cases property also. Nevertheless, in present day this system of marriage is almost negligible in the Memba society. The second form is *Sang-sey*. In this system the marriage between the boy and girl is also fixed by their family, but after the consent of the boy and girl are taken into consideration by the parents.

The process of marriage is started by negotiation initiated from the boy's side. Both the parents take consent of boy and girl for marriage. Both the parents consult *Kegar* the horoscope (*Kundali*) of their respective son or daughter with the help of Lama. A negotiator called as *Nyamber* (negotiator) from the boy's side approaches the parent of the girl. If the girl's parent gives affirmative reply, then, on an auspicious date, the boy with his father, brother, one or two friend, relatives along with *Nyamber*

* D.D Sharma, "Peculiar Customs and rites of Himalayan people", Mittal publication, New Delhi, 2000, p.1.

† M.M., Dhasmana, op.cit .p.93

(negotiator) go to the parent of the girl by carry one kilogram of butter, *Chang* (local beer), rice, barley, meat, millet powder, two cows, Baling, silver coins and three *Khada* (ceremonial scarf) along with them[‡]. The parent of the girl and their relatives welcome the boy's party at their residence. The boy at the girl's residence entertains all their relatives and guest stay there for three or four days. During the period, both the parties fix a tentative date of the marriage. Thereafter, boy's party returns and arranges varieties of consumable items to visit again the girl's parent. In a convenient day the boy's party goes to the parent of the girl and arranges a feast for their relatives and friends, which is called as *Lange Tezang*. After completion of all discussions and negotiations, they return. On the fixed date, *Nyamber* (mediator) along with two or three assistants fetches the girl lame of the bride's performs worship at the bride's house for prosperous life of the bride. The family members, their relatives and friends along with Lama leave the bride's residence on an auspicious time. As a token of love and affections, the bride's parents offer a gift of gold earring, beads, headgear, bead necklace, necklace, bangles, woolen cloth, silver ornaments and household utensils and articles of the bride. When they reach at the groom's house a gathering of invitees of the groom receive the bride's party with joys. *Lama* of the groom side performs worship for the prosperous life particularly for the bride and groom and the family member in general. At last, Lamas of both the parties together perform worship outside the house for the couple and allow them to enter in the house. Inside the house, her mother-in-law with some gift receives the bride. In the evening the groom in his residence throws a grand feast with rice, meat, vegetables and drink. After the feast, the boys and girls of the bridegroom's village perform the *Broh* dances for some time inside the groom's house.

Marriage by Love:

Love marriage happens when both the girl and boy love each other. The family of both the boy and girl is unknown about the relation. But when they tell their parents about their likes and decision for marriage, then the family of both party meet each other and fix the date for marriage. The process of marriage celebration is same as in arranged marriage and only difference is that the boy and girl marry according to their choice.

Marriage by escape:

The escape marriage happens when the boy and girl like each other but family has not allowed for the marriage. The other alteration generally occurs when their astrological calculations do not match or bride price is too high for the boy family. Left with no other alternative the boy and girl escape from their respective house and take shelter in their relatives or friends house until both the families agree for their marriage. If a family denies accepting the marriage then the couple marries without permission of the parents and lives independently. In most of the cases, family members generally accept them after they have a child and provide them with their share of property.

Marriage by Capture:

The situation of marriage by capture or abduction emerges when the boy likes the girl whom he had seen somewhere in relatives or friend's house and desperately falls in love with her, but the girl refuses his proposals. In order to get the girl the boy family member sends a proposal for the girl hand and on the other hand girl rejects the proposal. The situation makes the boy so angry that in order to get the girl anyhow he adopts the policy of capturing the girl. The capture of girl usually takes place when her family is not at home or if she is alone in agriculture field. The boy performs the entire operations with the help of friends and family members. The captured girl is taken to the

[‡] Field survey 2016, information provides by Rinchin Naksang age 65 male PI Mechuka town.

boy's house and is forced to accept the boy as husband. The situation sometimes becomes more complicated when boy forcefully seduces the girl to have physical relation against her wishes during captivity, on that after which the girl is compelled to become his wife and stay with him.

Marriage by Services:

In marriage by service, the boy proposes to serve the girl family by staying at their house for a fixed period as fixed by the girl family. The motive behind the proposed service is to fulfill the alternative of bride price demanded by the girl family. The situation arises when the boy family is poor and is not in a position to pay the high bride price demanded by the girl family. In most of the cases girl family do not object the proposal and allow the boy to serve. During this period, the boy does everything to appease the girl family and the girl's family carefully judges his character and capabilities. At the end of fixed period of serving, they allows boy to marry the girl without taking any bride price. Another form of marriage by service occurs when girl parent's demand service from the boy with a condition that he should stay permanently in their home. These cases occur when parents have only a girl child and the boy is poor, orphan or semi-orphan. The property of the girl parents becomes property of the boy after their death.

Marriage by Exchange:

The marriage by exchange can be classified into two forms. In the first form the exchange takes place when the boy family proposes for the girl hand whose brother has already proposed the boy's sister. In this case, both the parents decided not to take bride price and jointly share the marriage ceremony expenditure. In this form they only followed the exchange of girl between the two families. The second form is a sort of girl sale where a bride is exchanged some sort of property. Person who already has a wife and wants to acquire more wives adopt this system. The bought girl usually belongs from a poor family and thereby marriage takes place without any ceremony.

Widow Remarriage:

The Memba society allowed widow remarriage after the death of her husband. Generally, the Yuk-Chu-am (widow) automatically gets married to the deceased husband's brother. In this system, the widow sometimes gets the status of second or third wife if the brother of deceased husband is already married. This system helps the widow and their children to stay in the same house of the family. The children of the widow are treated equally because of the same family. In such case no elaborate ceremony is done. However, if the widow does not get married in the same family and is married to another person of the same clan of the husband or any person in the society, then the deceased husband's family claims bride price from the person. in case of widow refuses not to remarry and decides to stay as it is then she gets high respect and is entitled every right as a caretaker of her deceased husband's property until the son became adults.[§]

Divorce:

In early days, there was no room for divorce in Memba society, where they consider marriage as permanent and sacred bond. if the wife was errant than she lose most of her right in the family and sometimes in order to punish her, the husband also remarries another girl to look after the house. Here the errant wife was not entitled to remarry even if she demands it. however, there is acceptance in case where if there comes no message from husband who went for trading or hunting purpose and did not return for many years then woman somehow with the consent of husband family enter into remarriage on the ground that the person might died. Another cases, where the wife runaway with another person and settled in another place for many years. Then the person with whom she escaped

[§] Tasshi Philley, op.cit.

pays the fine double the amount of bride price. In both the above mentioned cases the definition of divorce cannot be given. In present days divorce has become quite common in Memba society, which shows the reflection of society's changes. As a result the divorce rates of the young generation are much higher than that of the older generation.

Status of Women:

Theoretically, the low status of women has been accepted in a majority of tribal society in North-east India. Similarly, in Memba society women are considered inferior in status to their male counterpart because of patriarchal nature. However, they hold respectable place in the society in term of freedom in various social set up and activity. the society welcome the birth of girl child in the house and considered as luck for the family who will bring them wealth to the form of bride price, when the daughter gets married. Life of women in general can be explained, where as a girl she is under the tutelage of her parents where she had to do all the house hold works with her mother. If the girl has a baby brother then she has to look after him. Unlike the boy, the girl is allowed to play and move freely when there is no work. The girl is expected to marry according to her parents' wishes except in a few exceptional cases where a girl marries according to her wishes.** The adult and married woman comes under the tutelage of her husband where she has to take all the household responsibility. The women had to engage themselves early in the morning with fetching and boiling of water, cleaning, cooking before their husband leaves. During daytime she had to do cultivation in the field and in the evening when she returns from the field, without resting, engaged herself in cooking, beverage making and serving. The male member seldom does the household activity. The outdoor activity is divided among the man and women, where the male member does all the heavy works as clearing forest and hunting, whereas sowing and harvesting in agriculture field and gathering of forest product is mostly done by the woman folk in Memba society. The *Pardah* system was not in practice among the Memba and they allowed their woman to mingle with anyone in the society. The women and the girl are expected not to have any extra marital relationship.

The women had no inheritance right of property of the family. However, there is few exceptional case where a couple has only single girl child. But in this case also it becomes the property of husband when she gets married. in case of widow, if the son is minor then she has the right to enjoy on the immovable property as caretaker till the boy become adult and mature enough. Like other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh the Memba women has property right in some of movable property like ornaments and other items, which she brings with her during marriage and in same way their daughter inherits the same items in future.†† The ornaments bought by man for his wife also become the property of the wife. Though the women have every right in the immovable property she possesses but the man folk can demand his wife to share some of the property in case of trade purpose and in dire need. The wife on the other hand has every right in the cash expenditure and production gathered by her husband through trade and other activities.

In terms of decision making the women are only allowed to share her view in a matter related to her the family but the final decision rest with the man folk of the family. In any decision related to dispute among two families or clan, they did not allow women folk to give any opinion and her duty during the meeting is to prepare food and beverage for the people present in the meeting. Here in general public meeting also the husband usually uses to have closed door discussion with his wife before taking part in the meeting. They allow their women to take active part in the social and

** Attam Goiba, op.cit.

†† B.B. Pandey, "*Status of Women in Tribal society: Arunachal Pradesh*", Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar, 1997, p.217.

religious ceremony of the society. The women becoming Buddhist nun, which is in practice among the Monpas of Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh and in Tibet, is not in practice among the Memba. Thus, it can be said that the system of getting women education through monasteries was not in practice in the society.

Conclusion

The Memba tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, a relatively small Buddhist community primarily settled in the Mechukha area along the Siang River follows traditional marriage practices rooted in their cultural and Tibetan-Buddhist heritage..like other tribe of Arunachal Pradesh memba marriage are typically arranged through negotiation between families, reflecting long standing social norms. Nevertheless, the detailed ethnographic accounts of Memba marriage rituals are limited but the existing anthropological and cultural studies suggest that Memba are generally endogamous in terms of religious and cultural identity but marriage outside the immediate kin or clan are customary. Exogamy at the clan level helps in avoiding close relative marriage. Thus, Memba marriage system historically reflects a traditional, socially governed institution emphasizing family and community alliances, elders' consent and culturally continuity. At the same time, it is dynamic, adapting gradually under contemporary social, legal and economic pressures.