

THE CHANGING PERCEPTION OF MEITEI MARRIAGE RITUALS: A CASE STUDY ON THE PERCEPTION OF MEITEI WOMEN IN DELHI

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Abstract

Marriage has always been a very important part of every society but the changing times have greatly influenced the traditional marriage practices existing in the society. Marriage turns out to be the most revolutionized institution in the contemporary society. The term marriage ritual is arbitrary because it refers not only to the marriage ceremony itself, but to an entire set of customs and rituals performed during the ceremony. This set of customs and rituals is a residual reflection of the social structure, world-view, and culture of the ethnic milieu in which it came into being and developed over the ages-long history of the institution of marriage. However, with the changes of time and space in the globalized era, the original ritual practices of marriage have been modified in many societies. This study aims to examine the changes in the perception of marriage rituals and practices among Meiteis¹. However, the main focus of this case study was with the Meitei women who are living in Delhi. As it has undergoing some changes in marriage practices which is believe to be threatened by modernization and exposed to the outside world through formal education, migration and urbanization.

Keywords: *Meitei, Marriage, Rituals, Sanamahi, Vaisnavism, Perception*

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Introduction

Marriage is a social universal institution; the institution of marriage occupies a prominent place in the social institutions of the civilised world. However, as the society developed, the marriage practices in most of the modern society have gone through various changes. Even values attached to it have changed tremendously. Marriage brings a number of obligations and privileges and therefore, every society has their own pattern of ritual practices for guiding marriages. In 'An Introduction to Social Anthropology' by D.N Mazumdar and T.N Madan, they defined that marriage establish a biological satisfaction on the wider collective uniformly. It ensures a bifold survival, that of the group and its culture. Every society has its own marriage system. Marriages in India are governed by Hindu Marriage Act and Special Marriage Act which regulates the marriage patterns. In the Hindu Marriage Act 1955 it is mentioned that every marriage must be performed through a ceremony. Therefore, the customary rites and ceremony in India relating to marriage are heterogeneous in nature and Meitei marriage ceremony is one of the many diverse forms of customary marriages in India.

The core of this study is primarily on Meitei marriage ritual and practices with a particular focus on the changing pattern of rituals and practices which is believed to be strive into by exposing to outside culture. The study also aims to explore people's perception regarding their religious beliefs and practices of the Meitei community and the role of religion in society. Defining the marriage rituals of the Meitei, it is essential to examine both the indigenous religion of the Meitei customs which is popularly known as *Sanamahism*² and the *Vaisnavite*³ customs. The Meiteis are by and large the followers of assimilated form of *Vaishnavism* who universally are devotee of the Radha-Krishna cult of the Bengal School of Vaishnavism but with the effortful attempt of Meitei religious reformist since late 20th century, the Meitei indigenous religion Sanamahi have been revived increasingly. Moreover, a Meitei marriage can be defined

as religious sacrament in which a man and woman are bound in permanent relationship for physical, social and spiritual purposes of procreation and confirmation of their status in the society. Thus, it is not merely an individual function but has social importance. Its ideals are fulfilment of procreation and maintain identity in the society.

In modern era Meitei marriage, wedding ceremonies, rituals and practices has changed due to various factors, such as education, legislation, westernization, industrialization, urbanization and globalization. Meitei marriage rituals are practicing by short duration. This study is about the changing perception of Meitei marriage which has seen drastic changes, over the last few years with changing time. In the light of the above background this study attempt to find out the changes in rituals and practices of Meitei marriage.

Operational Definition of the Concepts used in the Study

Rites of Passage: Arnold Van Gennep in his book 'Rites of Passage' have noted that virtually all human societies use ceremonial rites to mark significant transitions in the social status of individuals. These rites highlight and validate changes in a person's status, particularly on the occasion of such life-transforming events as birth, puberty, marriage, parenthood, and death. Van Gennep's orientation on rites of passage is an essential ingredient in the rejuvenation of society. Van Gennep along with other social scientists commonly believes that rites of passage act as preserver of social stability by liberalising the transition of cohorts of individuals into new status and prestige roles. Without rites of passage, society would be full of conflicts as individuals either struggled to assert new social statuses or resisted these statuses. By institutionalizing the transitions in social status, rites of passage help to eliminate the friction that would otherwise accompany the frequent renegotiations of relative status between individuals and groups within a society. (Khalaf, n.d.)

Marriage: Marriage is one of the most fundamental life cycle rituals of every human society. It has been prevalent in every known human society since ancient time in one form or another. There is no definition which adequately covers all types of human marriage. A number of definitions on marriage have been given by some prominent thinkers. Edward Westermarck in his "History of Human Marriage" defines marriage as the more or less durable connection between male and female lasting beyond the mere act of propagation till after the birth of offspring. According to Malinowski marriage is

a contract for the production and maintenance of children. Marriage is the sanctioning by a society of a durable bond between one or more males and one or more females established to permit sexual intercourse for the implied purpose of the parenthood.

Meitei Marriage: In Meitei society formal marriage is called *Luhongba*. This term is derived from the two words, *Lu* and *Hongba*- *Lu* means head (of our body) and *Hongba* is to inaugurate or initiate. So the etymological meaning of the term *Luhongba* is ritualistic inauguration of human mind and body. Inauguration in this context is like those of inauguration of temples, house, market etc. *Luhongba* is the inauguration of the boy and girl. It is a sacred bond between them forming a single mind and body. In Meitei tradition marriage, it is a permanent bond between two families and between two clans. When a girl is married to a particular *Sagei*⁴ she is not only marrying her husband. She is establishing a permanent bond with the whole family and their clan. From the marriage day onwards their married progenies shall take responsibility and care of their parents. It is worth mentioning here that there is no tradition of child marriage in Meitei society. This ceremony marks the entering life to a new stage – from youth to matured adulthood, both physically and mentally. There are three forms of marriage in Meitei tradition. They are as follows.

The case in which both the parents of boy and girl come into proper negotiation or they get eloped and then they get married. It is commonly known as *Luhongba*. In this case the boy and girl may or may not have any prior relationship between them.

In this case the boy and girl get eloped and stay at the boy's home. After some months or year later they will finally get acceptance by the parents and society as a couple after performing this ceremony. It is known as *Loukhatpa*⁵ in Meitei term. In this case it means the formal approval of the couple by the parents and society.

The last form is called *Keinya Katpa* meaning offering of the bride to the groom. In this case the boy and girl get eloped with or without their parent's consent. After formal dialogue and negotiation the bride is brought back to her family at the same day and then with a small ceremony the bride is offered to the groom and his family. Among these three types this one is the shortest and least elaborate.

Objectives of the study: The key purpose of the study is to explore the changes in the perception of traditional Meitei marriage rituals among the Meitei youth in Delhi especially women, the specific objectives are:

- To assess the changing perception of marriage rituals, this is believe to be thrive into the Meitei culture (especially in marriage institution) as a result of formal education, migration and urbanization.
- To analyse the changing perception of those Meiteis (women) who are currently residing in Delhi in respect to their roles in traditional rituals.
- **Research Questions:** In order to attain these objectives, this study focuses on the following research questions that guided the in-depth interviews with Meitei youth especially women. The following questions are:
 - How to locate the interplay between traditional marriage rituals and contemporary marriage rituals in relation to the perception among the educated Meitei youths in Delhi?
 - How multicultural settings of Delhi do influences the Meitei traditional marriage practices?
 - What role did migration and urbanization play in changing people's perception and understanding the existing marriage tradition?

Methodology of the Study

This research is descriptive in nature. And qualitative research designs have been used. The study is conducted at four particular places in Delhi as Meitei people in Delhi are not confined to a particular area, they are scattered in many parts of Delhi according to their location of educational institutes and job location. In-depth interviews and observation method was used for this study. In-depth interview was used as a tool because it enables the researcher to know the respondents more personally and also their perception regarding traditional settings of Meitei marriage practices. This method relies heavily on thick verbal descriptions of a particular social content to reach the ultimate target for what this study trying to understand. Interviews were done in a week long following face-face and telephonic, telephonic because my sample was a mixture of working women, student and housewife, keeping in mind their busy schedule. And while doing these interviews, researcher also get a contrast picture, while some argues positively about the changes and put negative remark on it, which make this study more complex. Furthermore, observation allows

the researcher to know about their lifestyles and how it differ from the lifestyle back in Manipur and which indicates that is also one of the major influence of urban settings of Delhi, which ultimately leads to changing perception of this women.

- The sampling universe of the study is Delhi,
- Used random sampling to select respondents
- Researcher took two variables - marital status and working status

On the basis of this, researcher chosen 4 respondents, all of them are women belong to Meitei community, among them two are married and two are unmarried, one each from both the category are working and the remaining unmarried respondents is student, married respondents is housewife. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include collecting data through interviews, conversation, observation and informal discussion. Secondary sources include collecting data from published books, journals and websites etc

Results and Discussions

The study discussed in this paper involved in-depth interviews with participants from different parts of Delhi. Four key respondents are participated in the study, and their willingness to share opinion and experiences will be central to the success of this case study. The researcher took two variables for this study, one is marital status and the other is working status. All of the four key respondents are woman belong to Meitei community, among them two are married and two are unmarried, one each from both the category are working and the remaining unmarried respondents is student, married respondents is housewife. The Meitei marriage Ritual has three distinct stages. Regarding their belief system only one of the respondents who is married and non working is religious she is a vaisnavite and the remaining claim themselves as agnostic.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the respondents

Age/Frequency		Belief System		Educational Qualification		Marital Status	
20- 25	1 Respondent	Sanamahism	Nil	PUC	1	Married	2
26-30	2 Respondents	Vaisnavism	1	Graduate	2	Unmarried	2
30-35	1 Respondent	Agnostic	3	Post-Graduate	1		

Pre-Wedding rituals and practices

Hainaba: It is the first preliminary stage. In this stage the parents of the boy approach the girl's family seeking the girl to be their daughter in law. Gifts of fruits and other food items are presented to the girl's parents by the boy's family. If the girl's parents regard the union as unsuitable then negotiations stop there. If it is regarded as a possibility then horoscopes of the boy and girl are read and if that prove favourable then a meeting is arranged between the elders of both families to discuss the matter further. This stage is one of the results of Hindugenization of Meitei marriage. The result of the study reveals that most of the respondents like to exempt this ritual as the practice of young men and women selecting their life-partners by themselves is becoming popular today. And one respondents felt that there are no changes regarding this rituals as she herself did an arrange marriage.

Yathang Thanaba: This stage is the official giving of consent to the marriage by the girl's parents to the boy's family. The eldest male of the boy's family with some other elders visits the girl's family, and formal negotiations of marriage are made. A day is fixed to perform the next ritual which is known as *Waroipot Puba*. In this rite the contract is sealed. For this the groom's family approach the bride's house bringing foods and other gift items. The result shows that all of the respondents felt that these rituals are unnecessary because it is the extension of the first rituals.

Heijingpot or *Heijing Kharai Puba*: The significance of this rite is to make the impending marriage known to everyone. In this rite groom's parents, relatives, friends and invitees come together to the house of the bride with seven varieties of fruits, clothes and *kabok* (parched rice) in decorated baskets called *Phingairuk*⁶. One *phingairuk* contains fruits for ancestor's deities and another for *Lamlai*⁷. Special clothes and gold ornaments for the bride are also brought in this occasion. After the completion of these formalities, a priest asks the reason for the arrangement; at that time the formal announcement of marriage between the daughter and son is announced by both the father of bride and groom. In this way, in front of the public gathering, the ceremonial recognition of the marriage is made. Then the elderly male relatives prostrate themselves to each other. The result reveals that the present generation still giving importance to this ceremony. Some of the respondents felt that there are some changes in this rite through scientific notion and addition of more

rituals which is influenced by modern Hindu wedding such as ring ceremony, cake cutting etc.

Wedding rituals and practices

Ritualistic preparations are made both at the residence of groom and the bride on the day of marriage. The groom's family and relatives go to the bride's residence with both the bride and groom. After reaching the bride's residence the groom sits at the *Phamban*⁸ which is prepare for him at the *Mangol Pibapham*⁹. An *Eeratphu*¹⁰ is placed in front of the groom and appropriate offerings are made. After this prayer, the bride is brought out and sanctified by the *Amaiba*¹¹. The bride sits to the left of the groom. Their hands are tied and *Kujaba*¹² is offered. Then the Kujaba is given to the groom's mother. The bride put two garlands of *kundo*¹³ flowers to the groom. Then the groom takes out one and garlands it to the bride. After praying to the parents and elders they come back to the groom's residence. The result of the study shows that most of the respondents felt to bring changes in some of the traditional rituals that do not have any values in modern day society and also question gender equality in the Meitei society.

Post Wedding rituals and practices

On the fifth day groom's family is invited for a sumptuous lunch called *Mangani chakkouba* performed in the house of the bride in which the two families choose friends and relatives to participate the lunch. On this day the preparations are made for the ancestral deities and offerings are made. After the lunch the bride's family present gifts, preferably clothes to the groom's party. The result of the study shows that this rite still continues in the modern day Meitei marriage though some of the respondent felt to bring change in few rituals through the notion of rationality.

Major Findings and Suggestions

The major findings are on the basis of interview schedules, conversation analysis and observation schedules. Through which the researcher have conducted the research to

find the needed information and data. However, secondary data sources published books and journals are also being used as essential sources. Through this study, it is found that the perceptions of their traditional marriage rituals among the youth especially women who are in Delhi for work or study have been influenced by the life style of urban-multicultural settings. And these changes have both pros and cons. From the field, researcher came to know that, there has been major influence of mainland Indian marriage tradition in Meitei marriage such as bringing in the ring ceremony, using many luxurious set ups, expensive photography (pre-wedding- post-wedding photography concept). Several comments during the interviews indicate that respondents had experienced many changes in their perception and interpretations of some particular rituals in Meitei marriage. As a result of unstructured interview most of the respondents continued to share their perception and willing to change of few rituals.

From the comments of all the four respondents, the following points emerged from the interviews. The perceived effects includes

- Difference in socialization leads to differ in perception (includes difference in belief system).
- Cultural assimilation through frequent contact with several dominant cultures in Delhi.
- Increasing the practice of class homogamy among the youths as a sign of development.
- Neolocality become increasingly common as more young couple seeks economic opportunity which leads to settle outside their home.
- The most important constituents for changing perception of traditional among the youth are advanced education, economic independence, influence of modernization which includes urban lifestyle, migration etc.

Through this case study it is found that some of the major rituals and practices are facing drastic changes. And the main cause of this changes are modern education, job opportunity outside state, influences of western life style, constitutional legislations, concept of modern luxurious marriage, register marriage, cross cultural and cross religious marriage, etc. But some of the traditional rituals and practices are still following by the Meiteis though with many modifications.

Suggestions:

- The basic approach should be inculcated the practices among Meitei people regarding traditional rituals and practices of Hindu marriage.
- The awareness should be increased in the Meitei young generations of Indian society to practice rational rituals and practices of Meitei marriage.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Meitei people are original settled in Manipur, a state in the North-eastern region of India and they are also scattered in many parts of the country and abroad. Their culture is seen as synthesis of Hinduism and their own ancient tradition. The very basic of the family and the society are organized and fulfilled through marriage. In India most marriages are governed by the specific personal laws governing each religion. Although we have come a long way in developing liberal perceptions, modern day society still has orthodox views and opinions inculcated within. The youth of today are quite modern and their perception regarding traditional marriage rituals have been change through frequent exposure with other culture or through development of rational thinking. So, in this study only Meitei youth (women) are taken as key respondents. In today Meitei marriage rituals, with change in time and change in era, it has also changed it to a certain level. With many new rituals copy from mainstream society have been added with the existing rituals, Meitei youth are found in many big cities in India and have shown a remarkable change in the traditional pattern or rituals of Meitei marriage, ultimately leads to mixing of culture and diminishing of original traditional rituals. The modern youth who are well educated are very positive towards such marriages. As they study along with people of different castes and religions thus they develop good relations with them. Change in the marriage pattern among the Meiteis is a not very recent phenomenon because when the Vaisnavite sect of Hinduism influenced the Meiteis, the changes in the pattern and rituals has already taken place but today due to the impact of modernization, socio-economic development and globalization also affect the perception of young people who are away from home and bring changes to age old traditional rituals. This study shows that the modern youth who are well educated and contact with urban multicultural setting are very positive towards such changes in the marriage

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