



Research Paper

Cultural Significance and Socio-Economic Impacts of Bride Price and Dowry Practices Among the Dal Tribe in Odisha

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Abstract

This research explores the cultural importance and socioeconomic ramifications of bride price and dowry customs within the Dal tribe residing in the Balangir district of Odisha. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, extensive fieldwork was conducted, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. The findings reveal that the Dal tribe, while primarily practicing bride price, also engages in dowry exchanges influenced by neighboring communities. Bride price, involving cash, clothes, rice, and liquor, is a critical element in marriage negotiations, fostering familial bonds and social cohesion. Conversely, dowry, though not demanded, is often given voluntarily, reflecting socio-economic status. Through detailed case studies, the research illustrates the cultural significance and socio-economic dynamics of these practices. The study highlights the complexity and variations of marriage payments, emphasizing the need for cultural sensitivity and awareness of gender equality and human rights in understanding these customs.

Keywords: Bride price, Dowry, Dal tribe, Marriage customs, Ethnographic research

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I. Introduction

Marriage payments refer to the financial transactions occurring between the families of the bride and groom. They encompass dowry, which involves the bride's family giving assets to the groom's family, and bride price, alternatively termed bride wealth, which consists of offerings from the groom's family to the bride's family. This exchange, whether in the form of money, gifts, or valuables, serves to solidify familial ties and formalize the marriage union (Goody, 1973).

Bride-price entails payment to the bride's family, typically made by the groom, although in some cases, the groom's family members may collectively contribute to cover the costs. This practice is predominantly found in subsistence economies characterized by horticultural or pastoral farming traditions (Conteh, 2017). The totality of the exchange whether in cash or goods and services as compensation to the family of the bride constitutes bride-price. Women and child labor are indispensable contributions in such societies. Gaulin and Boster (1990) proposed that bride-price is prevalent in societies primarily reliant on agricultural labor, especially those that highly value the contributions of women and children. Evans-Pritchard's investigation illuminated the cultural importance and communal interactions surrounding bride price within African societies. He detailed how the exchange of cattle, symbolizing wealth, was pivotal in forging matrimonial bonds and strengthening

familial connections. His analysis underscored that bride price transcended mere economic transactions, instead portraying a multifaceted social endeavor marked by negotiations, duties, and reciprocal bonds (Prichard, 1940).

Dowry represents the transfer of wealth, constituting a crucial aspect of bridal inheritance (Botticini and Siow, 2003). It is incumbent upon parents to fulfil the significant duty of ensuring their daughters receive their rightful inheritance upon marriage. Throughout history, dowry has denoted the conveyance of substantial assets and services to the bride's parents during the marriage ceremony. The practice of dowry prevails in societies where collective interests prioritize wealth and negotiate the exchange of rights (Fleising, 2003).

Even today, numerous tribes and rural communities in India maintain the tradition of bride wealth. For these communities, the bride price serves as a vital means of fostering unity among relatives and ensuring the stability of marriages. Tribes from the northeastern region like the Ho, Zeliang, and Regma Naga regard the payment of bride price as an essential aspect of the marriage ceremony (Asad, 1973).

In Odisha, a state in eastern India, the tribal communities have distinct cultural practices, including those related to marriage. Among these practices, the systems of bride price and dowry are significant and vary among different tribes. This practice is common among many tribal communities in Odisha like santal, munda, gond etc. and its specifics can vary widely between tribes. However, there are instances where dowry practices are observed, influenced by broader regional and cultural interactions. The tribal people of Odisha, for instance, may sometimes follow a dowry system influenced by neighboring non-tribal communities. This practice includes giving items like jewelry, household utensils, and sometimes cash to the groom's family. This practice is commonly used by numerous indigenous communities worldwide, including the Dal tribe of Odisha. The present study aims to understand the cultural significance and socio-economic of bride price and dowry practices among the Dal tribe in the Balangir district of Odisha.

Dal tribe

The Dal, a numerically small tribe primarily concentrated in Bolangir and Nuapada districts of Odisha, trace their ancestry back to a segment of the Kandha tribe, as per their own mythology and tradition. Formerly nomadic, they were referred to as “Dal” (meaning “groups” in Odia) due to their habit of moving in clusters. According to their folklore, some members journeyed to Puri, the sacred city of Lord Jagannath, where they were acknowledged for serving as priests in Hindu temples, receiving sandalwood and tulsi leaves in recognition (Ota et al., 2018).

The Dal people are linguistically diverse, using Kui, a Dravidian language, at home, and employing “Sambalpuri Odia” for communication between groups. Kui serves as the mother tongue for the Kandhas of Kandhamal district. Additionally, many are proficient in Hindi, the national language. Predominantly rural, the Dal community considers itself to be a “clean caste” within local society.

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design, focusing on an ethnographic approach to understand the intricate practices of bride price and dowry among the Dal tribe of Balangir district in Odisha. The aim was to capture the lived experiences, cultural significances, and socio-economic dynamics surrounding these practices.

II. Methods

The primary method involved extensive fieldwork conducted over a period of twenty days in Balangir district. The researcher immersed themselves in the community to observe and participate in various cultural practices and ceremonies related to marriage. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including village elders, married individuals, and family members involved in recent marriages. These interviews aimed to gather detailed narratives and personal insights into the customs and rituals of bride price and dowry. Detailed case studies were developed to provide in-depth examples of how bride price and dowry practices are enacted and experienced within the Dal community. These case studies were selected to illustrate different aspects of the practices and their variations. Several focus group discussions were organized with different segments of the community, such as women, men, and elders. These discussions facilitated a broader understanding of community perspectives and allowed for the comparison of views across different demographic groups. The researcher engaged in participant observation during marriage ceremonies and other related events. This method provided a first-hand account of the rituals, negotiations, and exchanges that constitute the bride price and dowry practices.

Bride price and Dowry

The Dal tribe is endogamous. It has internal social sub-divisions as exogamous clans' groups. Their clan system is very interesting. Traditionally, among them, there were six clan groups: Bhoi, Jhankar, Majhi, Mallik, Bisal, and Jani. In the course of time, four of these clans, such as Bhoi, Mallik, Majhi, and Jani, have

become endogamous units, each having different segments. For example, the Bhoi group is divided into two segments, namely Satgachhia and Bargachhia, i.e., seven trees and twelve trees. Satgachhia consists of seven lineages: Gursk Bhoi, Jugaska Bhoi, Libujka Bhoi, Chilmilka Bhoi, Jadaka Bhoi, Jalingia Bhoi, and Sat Malika Bhoi. The other segment, Bargachhia, consists of twelve different lineages, namely Patra, Mutka, Jabaska, Lipu Chika, Lurka, Karka, Bharka, Bisal, Kunar, and Tilika. Banjahlika and Thanapets. Further, the Mutka and Banjahlika lineages have become exogamous over time. However, the remaining two exogamous clans, like Bisal and Jhankar, have retained the traditional exogamous nature and make marital alliances with the other four clans.

Adult marriage and monogamy are the norm in the Dal society. Yet in certain cases, polygyny is allowed if the first wife is found to be barren. Cross-cousin marriage is the preferred form of matrimony. Levirate and sororate are also allowed.

Arranged marriage is very common and marriage by mutual consent is also allowed. In arranged marriage, the boy's side takes the initiative to select the bride and settle the matrimony through the process of negotiation. Usually, the proposal of marriage is made by the boy's parents. The parents or the elder brother of the groom goes with a pot of liquor and a basket full of fried rice (*bhuja*), *lia* (khan) or flattened rice (*chuda*) to the bride's house accompanied by his relatives. If the bride's father accepts the liquor and eats the *bhuja* and *chuda*, the proposal is considered to be approved. On that day, the customary bride price is settled and the date for the marriage is fixed in consultation with the village astrologer (*Nahaka*). The bride price is paid by the boy's side to the bride's side before performing marriage. It usually consists of some cash, clothes for all the members of bride's family, one quintal of rice, a goat and about twenty bottles of liquor.

On the scheduled date of wedding, the bridegroom goes to bride's place for marriage. The priest (*jhankar*) officiates in the wedding rites which resembles that of the caste Hindus. The groom sits on a sacred mat on the wedding altar and the rituals start. The wedding rites include burning of sacred fire (*homa*), joining and tying of hands of the bride and the groom (*hastagranthi*) while chanting mantras. The marriage feast is hosted by both the families. After marriage a married woman ties *bratagranthi* in her right upper arm.

They have some rituals regarding bride price. It is believed in Dal community that the saree that comes from the boy's house, the girl will sit in the marriage wearing the same saree. In their community, they give 10,000 for clothes to the girl's family members. The boy's family give rice, lentils, goat etc. for eating arrangement of both boy's and girl's family and friends. They have this practice from primitive times.

Under the genuine grounds of adultery, impotency, barrenness, maladjustment and chronic sickness of either of the spouse, divorce is allowed by the traditional community council (*Jatia Samaj*) of the Dal tribe. Some persons of the tribe designated as *Mahamanab* play an important role in settling internal customary disputes including divorce. In cases of divorce, the man and woman seeking divorce are brought before the *Jatia Samaj* where the matter is discussed and finalized after which the man gives the woman some cash and a new cloth. No other compensation for divorce is allowed. Infants go with mother and elder children stay with father. After the divorce is formally sanctioned by Dal *Jatia Samaj*, the man and woman are free to remarry since re-marriage of widows or widowers and divorcees is allowed by Dal *Samaj*.

Case study 1

Hajamil Kuar is an agriculturist. He has four members—his mother, father, wife, and son in his family. His mother and father are engaged in cultivation; his wife is doing household chores, and his son is going to Anganwadi.

One month ago, he got his sister married. In the Dal community, groom's families don't demand any kind of dowry. So Hajmamil Kuar gave her sister's in-laws a bike, cooler, TV, *Khuri* (bowl), utensils, gold earrings (*Kana putki*), *jhuntia*, anklet (*Pajhal*), and nose ring (*Naka putki*) by his own wish.

As bride price, his sister's in-laws gave his family 10,000 rupees in cash for a saree for every family member, 32 mana of rice, lentils, fried rice (*bhuja*), *lia* (*khan*), or flattened rice (*chuda*), and liquor to the bride's house.

Case study 2

Sanjhala Jhankar is a housewife, and her husband, Fakir Jhankar, is a tailor. She has five members in their family: her mother-in-law, her father-in-law, her husband, and her son. Her mother-in-law and father-in-law engage in agricultural work.

She told me that when she got married, she had brought a TV, cooler, godrej, dressing table, alna, trunk, grinder, anklet (*panjhal*), earrings, and a nose ring (*Naka putki*) as dowry as per the wishes of her family. In the Dal community, they don't have any concept of dowry. That's why whatever the girl's family happily gives; the boy's family keeps it.

As bride price, her in-laws gave her family an amount of 9,000 rupees in cash for a saree for every family member, 32 mana of rice, 3 packs of sweet, *Bhuja (Miuri)*, lentils, fried rice (*bhuja*), *lia (khan)*, or flattened rice (*chuda*), and liquor to the bride's house.

Case study 3

Hari Jhankar is an agriculturist. He has five members in his family: his wife, two sons, and one daughter. His daughter got married a year ago. He gave her daughter a TV, bike, watch, nose ring, and earrings of their own choice. He also said that they have the ritual of the bride price in their community. So, his daughter's in-laws gave them an amount of 9,500 rupees in cash (for a saree), rice (for reception or food arrangements for the groom's family and friends), lentils, sweets, flattened rice, liquor, and *chuda*.

When the researcher asked him about their marriage, he told me that in our time, we did not give so much money and things. But everyone used to give the same things that they give now; only the amounts of goods vary from primitive to modern in price. At their time of marriage, the girl's family gave him a watch and cycle. And at that time, he did not give that much money to the bride's family.

III. Conclusion

The Dal tribe exhibits a unique blend of endogamous and exogamous marital practices, with internal social divisions manifesting in complex clan structures. Traditionally, they had six clans, with four becoming endogamous over time, each subdividing further. Marriage practices reflect both traditional and contemporary influences, balancing ritual customs with evolving socioeconomic conditions.

Adult marriage and monogamy are norms, though polygyny is permitted under certain circumstances. Preferred forms of marriage include cross-cousin unions, and practices like levirate and sororate are accepted. Arranged marriages predominate, with the boy's family initiating proposals through symbolic offerings of liquor and rice. Acceptance of these offerings signifies approval and leads to the negotiation of bride price and wedding arrangements. The bride price typically includes cash, clothing, rice, a goat, and liquor, underscoring the tribe's agricultural and pastoral lifestyle. Rituals surrounding marriage emphasize both spiritual and social integration. The groom's family provides a saree for the bride, which she wears during the ceremony. Wedding feasts hosted by both families symbolize communal harmony. Divorce, although regulated by the *Jatia Samaj*, is permissible under specific grounds, reflecting the community's pragmatic approach to marital issues. The *Mahamanab* play a crucial role in mediating disputes, underscoring the importance of traditional leadership.

The Dal tribe's marital customs are a testament to their rich cultural heritage and adaptability. While adhering to traditional norms, they incorporate modern elements, ensuring the continuity and relevance of their practices in a changing world. Over time, the nature and value of gifts and bride price have evolved, mirroring broader economic changes.

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