

Marriage Songs: A Study of Dowry Practices and Child Marriage of Bauri Community of Bankura District

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Abstract:

Marriage is a most significant *Sanskaras* for both men and women. Because men and woman are started living together by the marriage for rest of the life. So, marriage ceremony is celebrated as the entrance of *Sansar* or *Grihastha ashram* (householder's life). The Bauri community celebrates this transformative stage of life with great joy and festivity, involving music, dance, traditional instruments, food, and merrymaking, making it a cherished and memorable event. The *Bauris* have no any Brahmin priest in their marriage ceremony. The *Bauri* women are playing a prominent role to conduct their marriage rituals step by step along with singing the marriage songs. The wedding songs of the *Bauris* reflect not only their love for music but also various customs of the Bauri society, such as the long-standing dowry system and the practice of marrying off young girls.

Keywords: Bauri caste, Marriage rituals, Marriage Songs, Dowry system, Child marriage

India is a diverse country and its diversity is not only in geographical or natural but also of its rituals, culture and livelihood of tribes and castes. The *Bauri* caste is belonging in lower Hindu castes. But, among the lower Hindu castes, the *Bauri* caste is different for its marriage rituals and songs. In Hindu marriage ceremony there is a common thing that is rhyme of *Napit* (men of *Barber* caste). The *Napit* of bride and groom sides both entertained the people who are present at '*Chhadnata*' by the rhymes. *Ram-Sita*, *Shiva-Parvati*, domestic life or love affair are mainly the subjects of these rhymes.¹ The marriage songs of the Bauri community deeply reflect various aspects of their social life, such as the dowry system and the practice of child marriage.

In the Bauri community, marriage negotiations mark the initial phase of the wedding process, where family elders and relatives actively participate in evaluating the social and economic backgrounds of prospective matches. The groom's worth is closely linked to his family's economic standing, often symbolized by the number of ploughs they own—a traditional indicator of wealth in agrarian societies.² As most *Bauris* are landless agricultural laborers, this inquiry becomes crucial for the bride's family. Notably, families with better economic resources tend to demand higher dowries, reflecting the intersection of poverty, labor dependency, and enduring dowry practices within the community.³

After the match is finalized, both families hold a formal meeting with the *Sholoana*, the traditional council of the Bauri community, led by the village head or the *Majhi* (*Dak Majhi*). This meeting, mainly involves discussions on dowry, financial obligations, and the arrangements for food and hospitality. Their oral poem on marriage reflects the dowry system.

*“Borer baba bole chhili**Nai kona liba**Suche suta porain bole**Bor ghurai liba... ”⁴*

This song reflects the strong demand of dowry of groom’s father. In case bride’s family fail to give the dowry then in the middle of the ceremony, groom side refused to marry without dowry. It is also clearly indicating in below mentioned ‘Tusu song’ (Tusu is a famous female deity in South-West Bengal and she is worshiped in every Bauri family).

*“Bitir biha diba kemone,**Amar ghum ase na nayane,**Amoni juger riti-niti,**Pon chhara bikoina biti (daughter). ”⁵*

Through the ‘Tusu song’, the bride’s father expresses his helplessness in continuing marriage negotiations due to his inability to meet the dowry demands of the groom’s family. It highlights a harsh social reality — that marriage without dowry has become nearly impossible and the pressure of dowry robs families of peace and sleep. However, if we look at colonial or even ancient literature, a different picture emerges. In 1892, Herbert Risley recorded that ‘the groom would give the bride’s father 1 to 4 rupees and offer a feast to the members of the caste.’⁶ Today, the situation is reversed, and it is the groom’s side that demands dowry. If the groom holds a government job or belongs to a financially stable family, the dowry demands are significantly higher. Among the Bauri community, the practice of dowry has been steadily increasing. In the 1990s and early 2000s, grooms’ families often demanded not only cash but also everyday items like bicycles and wristwatches.⁷

Community leaders within the Bauri society did not accept this growing trend. They organized meetings to discuss and try to put an end to the dowry system. Sunil Kumar Das also mentions this issue in his writings. In the 1970s, members of the “Bauri Swa-Jati Kalyan Nabajubak Samiti” protested against the rising problems of alcohol abuse and dowry practices within their community.⁸ However, it is important to note that dowry is not limited to the Bauris — it is prevalent across many communities in society.

Child marriage, like the dowry system, remains deeply entrenched in the Bauri community. The issues of child marriage come up repeatedly in their marriage songs. According to Digen Barman the Bauris generally marry at the age of 14 to 15 for boys and 9 to 10 for girls.⁹ Below mentioned marriage songs also witness regarding child marriage, like-

*“Borer baba shudhainchhe raja he**Tumar rani kato baro?*

Kapod–chupode tumar raja he

Rani anek baro”¹⁰

In this song the father of the groom asked to the girl’s father about the age of the girl. In response to the question, girl’s father told that, after wearing saree, ‘*Rani*’ (queen), that is the girl is marriageable. Clothes make the girl’s look bigger than her actual age. The age of the girl is not considerable here rather the looks of the girl.

Determining whether a bride has reached the appropriate age for marriage is a crucial aspect of the wedding process. From the aforementioned song, it is evident that although the girl (*Rani*) is still young, she appears to be a woman when dressed in a saree. This reflects a widespread cultural notion that girls begin to be seen as women once they start wearing sarees. As a result, maturity is often judged based on appearance and attire rather than actual age. This perception has led to the early marriage of many Bauri girls, often during adolescence.

To point out the causes of the practice of early marriage among the lower rank castes in the society, Risley opined that, “the custom of infant marriage has been consciously borrowed from the higher caste...”.¹¹ The *Bauris* are residing as ‘*Sudra*’ (lower rank Hindu) in the Hindu society from a long time and therefore so many rituals or social customs are easily included in the practice of *Bauri* community in obedience to upper classes and early marriage of girls is one of those. But, by the spread of education and social and religious reforms, the upper-class Hindus enhanced the age of marriageable of their daughters. But uneducated *Bauris* failed to do so.¹²

According to 1931 census, 5.89% and 5.77% of Bauri girls respectively 7 - 13 age group and 14 -16 age group were married in Bengal. This means that 11.66% of Bauri girls were married at low age.¹³ Similar trend was observed in the Census report of 1961, here recorded that 7531 girls, i.e. 3.17% of *Bauri* girls were married below the age of 14 in the West Bengal, among them 2765 girls were coming from Bankura District.¹⁴ In 1981, the percentage of girl child marriage of *Bauri* caste in West Bengal decreased to 1719 i.e. 0.48%¹⁵ which indicates their awareness of health and social issues. Although, the number of child marriage has decreased over the time, but it is still a big problem in West Bengal.

Early marriage remains a major obstacle to the social and economic advancement of the Bauri community. It significantly restricts access to education and the development of self-reliance, especially among women, and contributes to a range of health-related problems. These include childbirth complications, malnutrition, and higher rates of maternal and infant mortality—all of which collectively impede the community’s overall well-being. A study conducted by Bankura Sammilani Medical College and Hospital (Bankura, West Bengal) between June and August 2010 supports this concern. Blood tests of 246 pregnant Bauri women revealed a high prevalence of anaemia, underscoring the severe health risks associated with early pregnancy in this marginalized group. Below mentioned table highlighted the issues of anaemia of low aged pregnant Bauri women of Bankura district.

Table No. 4.3

Trende of anaemia in pregnant Bauri women

Age group	Hb (g/dl)	Number of affected	Nature of Anaemia		
			Mild	Moderate	Severe
15-19	9.50	53 (21.55%)	2(3.77%)	50 (94.34%)	1 (1.87%)
20-24	9.53	158 (64.23%)	9 (5.69%)	148 (93.67%)	1 (0.63%)
25-29	9.57	32 (13.0%)	6 (18.75%)	26 (81.25%)	0
30-34	9.93	3 (1.22%)	2 (66.67%)	1 (33.33%)	0
Total	9.72	246 (100%)	21 (8.54%)	225 (91.46%)	2 (0.81%)

Source: Journal of Clinical and Diagnostic Research, Vol-6(2), April, 2012, pp. 231-233.

The data presented in the above-mentioned table highlights a concerning trend of anaemia among pregnant Bauri women in Bankura. Out of the 246 women surveyed, the majority (64.23%) belong to the 20–24 age group, with an average haemoglobin (Hb) level of 9.53 g/dl. Alarming, 93.67% of women in this age group suffer from moderate anaemia. The lowest average Hb level, 9.50 g/dl, is observed in the 15–19 age group, which constitutes 21.55% of the sample. This group also exhibits the highest prevalence of moderate anaemia, affecting 94.34% of the individuals. Interestingly, the 30–34 age group, although representing only 1.22% of the sample, shows a relatively higher average Hb level of 9.93 g/dl. It is important to note that, according to WHO guidelines, the cut-off value for anaemia during pregnancy is 10.9 g/dl, indicating that all age groups surveyed fall below the recommended level. These findings suggest a strong correlation between early pregnancy and a higher incidence of anaemia among Bauri women.¹⁶

In conclusion, the wedding songs of the Bauri community not only reflect their musical inclination and cultural heritage but also vividly portray their socio-economic realities, the status of women, and the deep-rooted social evils such as dowry and child marriage. These songs serve as a cultural lens through which the hardships of the community—extreme poverty, landlessness, lack of education, and the continued prevalence of oppressive practices—come to light. Such factors collectively act as significant barriers to the social progress and empowerment of the Bauri society.

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