Chapter IV

MARRIAGE

"Marriage means the living together, the cohabitation, of a man and a woman or of men and women in a socially approved union".¹

Marriage is obligatory amongst the Rabhas without which it is better to die a devil's death. The husband and the wife are believed to be two wheels of the chariot of life, which cannot run in the absence of either of the two. One is complementary to the other. The Rabhas cannot simply understand the proposition as to how a man can carry on in a state of single blessedness. This is the emotional aspect of marriage amongst them. Thus marriage is, in essence, a ritual and a formality very important, through which an individual has to go, to be able to start his or her life in the "Grihasthasrama", that is, the householder's life.

According to Westermarck² "it is a relation of one or more men to one or more women which is recognised by custom

or law and involves certain rights and duties both in the case of the parties entering the union and in the case of children born of it.

"Marriage is a socially recognised union between persons of opposite sex. It differs from non-marital sexual relationships primarily through this factor of social recognition and through the increased duration of time which such recognition assumes. It derives its importance as a social institution from the fact that it provides a stable foundation for the creation and organisation of a conjugal group."\(^3\)

Marriage and family are complementary concepts: marriage is an institution; family, the association that embodies the institution. Both are rooted in sex, but cannot be understood merely from the point of view of sexual relations. The latter is a matter of sheer biology; marriage and family are the cultural superstructure upon a biological foundation.\(^4\)

MARRIAGEABILITY

The intensive study of three hundred families belonging to different sub-groups revealed that there is a


high rate of early marriage among the Rabhas. Majority of the married males were married between twenty and twenty-five while in the case of females it was fifteen to twenty. It is evident that there is no child marriage among the Rabhas and it is not usual for a man and a woman to marry before he or she attains puberty. A difference of four or five years in the age of the partners is necessary, but some cases have been recorded when an old man was married to a young girl. The betrothal ceremony generally takes place one or two months before marriage.

Generally an eligible youth should belong to a good family and possess good moral character. He should be an earning member and hard worker. Similarly a maiden should be beautiful as well as industrious, so that she can assist her husband in agricultural work and adjust herself to the new atmosphere.

Although the institution of marriage is considered a permanent relationship between a man and a woman, cases of divorce and remarriages are found.

MONOGAMY

Monogamy is the general rule. Very few persons have more than one wife. When I asked some of the elderly Rabhas whether it was due to poor economic conditions, scarcity of women or the socially accepted norms, they simply replied
that it was all due to their socially accepted norms.

POLYGAMY

The Rabhas do not favour polygamy unless the wife is barren or dead. It is not essential that plural wives should be real sisters. They may or may not be. Sometimes a barren wife brings her own relation and persuade her husband to marry her. The position of the first wife is generally superior to that of the second. Polygamy is permitted to the entire tribe and not restricted to some privileged persons. The number of wives generally do not exceed two or three. In the general survey only two per cent people were found with two wives and only one had three wives.

If a man marries for a second time when his first wife is alive, she does not live in a separate house. She lives with the first under her control. Generally the consent of the first wife is obtained if a man wants to marry again. If a wife thinks that her husband is losing interest in her, she consults an ojha and takes his help secretly to attract her husband's attention. The ceremony for second marriage is the same as that observed for the first.

POLYANDRY

The Rabhas are not polyandrous like the Todas and Kotas of south India. Mazumdar holds that "from Kashmir to
Assam, among the Mongoloid people polyandry is reported in some form or other.  

SEXUAL TABOO

The sex relations between brothers and sisters is prohibited. The parents check incest amongst them. Marriage within the same clan is not allowed. The society disfavours sexual relations with brother's wife or sister-in-law. Only one such case was found in the course of the survey. Society imposes a fine for defying such taboos. The children born as a result of incestuous unions, are not considered legitimate.

One may marry cousins from the mother's side but not cousins from the father's side. Parallel-cousins can be married. That is, a brother may give in marriage his daughter to his sister's son.

LEVIRATE AND SORORATE

Both junior levirate and junior sororate forms of marriage are prevalent among the Rabhas; but senior levirate and senior sororate forms are taboos. Some illustrative example are given below:

(1)  

**Junior Levirate**

- Kensa
- Kandura

(elder brother)  (younger brother)

*Jnu*

(wife)

1) Kensa and Kandura were real brothers;

2) On the death of Kensa, the elder brother, *Jnu*, the wife of Kensa married Kandura, the younger brother of her late husband—a case of junior levirate.

(2)  

**Senior Levirate**

- Kerpak
- Khirod

(elder brother) (younger brother)

*Tipti*

(wife)

1) Kerpak and Khirod were two real brothers;

2) On the death of Khirod, the younger brother, Tipti, his wife cannot marry Kerpak, the elder brother of her late husband—a case of senior levirate.
(3)

Junior Sororate

Padumi  Panei
(elder sister)  (younger sister)

Listi (husband)

i) Padumi and Panei were two real sisters;

ii) On the death of Panei's husband, Listi, the husband of Padumi married Panei—a case of junior sororate.

(4)

Senior Sororate

Randana  Chandana
(elder sister)  (younger sister)

Topok (husband)

i) Randana and Chandana were two real sisters;

ii) On the death of Randana's husband, Topok, the husband of Chandana cannot marry Randana, the elder sister of Chandana—a case of senior sororate.
KINDS OF MARRIAGE

Among the Rabhas four kinds of marriage are in vogue. These are:
1. Bhari sinkai
2. Nok dankai
3. Jangoi dankai
4. Lara larini

These can be classified as formal and informal as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal</th>
<th>Informal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bhari sinkai</td>
<td>1. Nok dankai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lara larini</td>
<td>3. Lara larini</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A formal marriage is celebrated with a detailed ceremony while informal marriages are very simple and less expensive. Both are equally binding. An informal marriage confers no social stigma or disability on the wife or the children. The formal one is performed by persons espiring for self respect and for the honour of their fellow beings. In formal marriage some traditional formalities have to be observed.

FORMAL MARRIAGE

Bhari sinkai is the only formal marriage of the Rabhas. It is arranged by the parents of both the parties with the consent of the girl. The initiative is taken by
the parents of the boy.

First Meeting

Once the bridegroom's parents decide on a particular girl they first fix a day for initiating the purpose. On the morning of the prescribed day two or three relatives of the boy, a jorkal (formally married husband and wife), together with a few other male and female members proceed to the girl's house for preliminary discussions. If on the way they come across something which is considered a bad omen, they cancel the journey and return home. Generally the following incidents are considered as bad:
1. If somebody comes opposite with logs of wood on his head or shoulder or in a bullock cart,
2. If somebody is plastering a house,
3. If a snake passes on their right side or a jackal on the left side,
4. If a member of the girl's family is working with a hoe.

Whenever such things happen, negotiations are dropped. But if they come across such omens which are considered good, the groom's party thinks that the marriage will be long and happy. The following omens are considered as good omens:
1. If somebody is passing with a pitcher full of water,
2. A burning pyre,
3. A snake on their left or a jackal on the right side,
4. A basket with fish.

When the groom's party proceeds to the girl's house for negotiations they carry with them one jonga and a customary chari-koniya (a four-cornered cotton bag) with a few coins. The boy's party makes the proposal for the marriage offering the girl one rupee as chalami (present). If the latter agrees she is offered another chalami of Rs. 2.00 and the marriage is settled with the parents of the girl offering the jonga and chari-koniya. On the contrary, if the girl refuses to accept chalami, the groom's party cancels her. A day is fixed for a second meeting on the same day.

Second Meeting

After about a month again two or three relatives of the boy with a jorkai and a few other male and female members proceed to the girl's house. This time also they carry with them a jonga and a chari-koniya. The chari-koniya contains the following items invariably:

1) Katrai (a knife)
2) A packet of tupai (a kind of common pulse)
3) Chuntim (a small brass-pot with lime)
4) Khok or lungkhi (a cotton bag)
5) Khocheng (a bamboo comb)
6) Kul-pana (betel-nut and betel-leaf)
7) Jati thusini bakok jorcha (two bamboo pipes containing
8) Dress and ornament for the bride as follows:

Dress:

i) A piece of kambung (a wrapping cloth used by a woman to cover the upper part of the body).

ii) A piece of riphan (a female dress used to cover the lower portion of the body).

iii) A piece of khopang (a piece of cloth used by a woman as head dress).

Ornaments:

i) One rubak (a chaplet of the waist made of ivory).

ii) A chan tikar (a bracelet).

iii) A piece of nakapati (an ornament of the nose).

iv) A piece of khusa-makra (hair-pin).

v) A pair of har golai (an ornament of the hand used near the elbow).

On this day the bridegroom's party fixes the date of marriage or if fixed already confirms it. Another date is fixed for khantikai (advance information) which generally takes place two or three days before the day of marriage.

The above is the procedure observed among the Rongdania and Maitoria Rabhas. Among the Dahurias, once the
parents decide to establish a relationship with a particular girl they first fix a day for this purpose and on that day two or three relatives of the boy, a jorkai and a few other male and female members proceed to the girl's house for preliminary discussion. The party carries one jonga and a packet of betel-nut. The boy's party makes the proposal for the marriage and the girl is offered Re. 1.00 as chalami. If the latter agrees the proposal she is given another chalami of Rs.2.00 and the marriage is settled with the parents of the girl. A day is fixed for panchini (confirmation of the marriage).

On the day of panchini also two or three relatives of the boy, a jorkai and a few other relatives proceed to the girl's house. This time they carry with them a jonga, a packet of rice, a basketful of bananas and a packet of fried rice together with the dress and ornaments for the bride as given above. For this purpose the girl's father invites the villagers and clan-members to his house. The boy's party fixes the date of marriage or if fixed already confirms it.

Among the Pati and Baitlia Rabhas a different procedure is observed. Once the parents of a boy decide on a particular girl they first fix a day to initiate the proposal. On this day a few relatives mostly women proceed to the girl's house for a preliminary discussion and another day is fixed for
formal discussion. On this day the same party proceeds to the girl's house with a packet of chira (fried rice). If the girl's parents accept the proposal the packet of fried rice is received; otherwise, it is refused. If the proposal is accepted by the girl's parents another day is fixed for joran (confirmation of the marriage). On this day the father of the girl invites the villagers and clan-members to his house and the boy's party proceeds to the girl's house with a packet of betel-nut, a packet of fried rice, a basketful of bananas and a jonga together with the dress and ornaments for the girl as stated above. The girl's hair is dressed by a jorkai woman who also puts a vermilion mark on her forehead. On this day the boy's party fixes the date of the marriage or if fixed already confirms it.

Khantikai (advance information)

On this day, two relatives of the bridegroom proceed to the bride's house to give advance information. They pay the money payable to the parents of the bride and the changini melakai (village council) as follows:

1. Ga-pon (bride-price) Rs. 25.00
2. Religious organisations Rs. 5.00
3. Social organisations Rs. 5.00
4. Jatiya Sammilan (National Council) Rs. 2.00

Total - Rs. 37.00
An extra amount of Rs. 5.00 must be paid to the changini melakai if the marriage takes place during the cultivating season.

On the day of marriage early in the morning two or three relatives of the bridegroom, a jorkai and a few other male and female members proceed to the bride's house. This time they carry with them a chakka to (red fowl).

In the bride's house a simple yet important ceremony is held in which the jorkai man slaughters the red fowl uttering some mantras.

The clan-members of the bride's village receive barai tamul (betel-nut and betel-leaf meant for the clan-members) from the bridegroom's party.

The bride puts on the bridal attire with the help of the jorkai woman and then she is taken in a procession to the bridegroom's house. A bride's party accompanies her which is called nakswami.

About a few yards away from the bridegroom's house a gate is constructed. The gate is made of retthe phang.
(banana tree). The purpose of the gate is to welcome the bride's party and to keep away the evil spirits. People from the bridegroom's house come to the gate and receive the bride's party. At that time a tender cock is slaughtered outside the welcome gate by the bridegroom's party in the name of Risi Bai.

To Thakai (omen testing)

When the bride's party reaches the court-yard of the bridegroom's house, the bridegroom comes out of the house. In the court-yard, the village deuri twists a pair of fowls (a cock and a hen) uttering some mantras to note the success or failure of the conjugal life of the new couple. The entire party of the bride waits outside the house till the examination is over. If the cock dies first, it indicates the death of the husband before his wife and vice versa. If the cock and the hen die almost simultaneously and on the same spot facing each other, it indicates a happy and successful conjugal life.

Welcome at the House Door

When the bride enters the house of the bridegroom a jorkai woman receives her at the door. The jorkai woman should have been happily married blessed with a number of children and prosperous.
An unmarried girl should not receive the bride. The mother-in-law of the bride also welcomes the bride at the door of the house.

worship Of Rantak

When the bride is taken inside the house for the first time, she is taken to the nakhung (the sleeping room) where the bride and the bridegroom propitiate Rantak* (the deity of the house) together.

worship Of Risi Bai

The bridegroom and the bride then propitiate Risi Bai in the middle of the court-yard. For this purpose, a marital canopy is made in the middle of the court-yard. The canopy is made of four bamboo poles. Just by the side of each bamboo pole one small plantain sapling is planted at the foot of which new earthen pot is kept. Each of these pots is half filled with water. A fifth pot is kept in the centre and all the pots are painted with vermilion. Mango twig with seven leaves and a betel-leaf with a betel-nut are kept in the pot placed in the centre.

The bride then bows down and touches the bridegroom's feet with her hands to show her respect to him and thereafter both of them receive khengetong (blessings) from the elderly.

* The Rabhas keep a jar filled up with rice which is placed above a bamboo platform in the north-east corner of the living room. This is identified as their household deity.
persons by touching their feet. Presents are given to the new couple in cash and kind by the relatives according to their relationship.

Hata Chuani

The jorkai woman then leads the bride to the nok pimung (kitchen) where the bride touches the foods meant for the guests by a hatare (a wooden spoon). She is to distribute at least one item of foods to the guests.

Nokswami Khaon (feasting the bride's party)

The bridegroom's parents prepare jonga and slaughter pigs in large numbers to entertain the bride's party. The bride's party stays for a day in the bridegroom's house. A lot of drinks are consumed. In fact, it is a marathon beer drinking session.

Nokswami Bidaki (farewell to the bride's party)

The bride's party leaves the bridegroom's house in the afternoon with presents from the bridegroom's parents as under:

1. A Jonga (jar with home-made beer)
2. Bamchi jorcha (two bamchi cakes)
3. Kui-pana (betel-nut and betel-leaf)
4. Bak sibong (a packet of pig-meat)
5. Mala (tobacco).

Nok Chibarkai Ceremony

After seven days the newly married couple visits the bride's parents' house with a jonga as a present to the bride's parents. The couple stays there for the day and returns to their own house in the afternoon.

The following is a table showing the feasts in general given at the time of a formal marriage by the boy's father:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Feast Given By</th>
<th>Place of Feast</th>
<th>Name of Feast</th>
<th>Invites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Boy's father</td>
<td>Boy's house</td>
<td>Nokpimungl</td>
<td>A large number of friends and relatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>rumkai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Boy's father</td>
<td>Boy's house</td>
<td>Khaon</td>
<td>Bride's party, invites for marriage only.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Boy's father</td>
<td>Boy's house</td>
<td>Basia khaon</td>
<td>Bride's party, invites for marriage party only.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Boy's father</td>
<td>Boy's house</td>
<td>Kamla tanga</td>
<td>Workers and helpers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Menu**

1. Rice
2. Dal
3. Vegetables
4. Rice beer
5. Meat (pig, fowl and goat)

The bride's father gives no feast at all. It is strange to note that the expenditure incurred on a marriage by the bride's side is almost nil whereas the bridegroom's side spends a large amount.

**Changes In The System Of Formal Marriage**

The Rabhas are very orthodox in their rituals and ceremonies, but the present generation want to adopt the Assamese Hindu culture in one way or the other.

**INFORMAL MARRIAGES**

We have so far considered the formal marriage among the Rabhas. Now we shall consider informal marriages.

1. Nok dankai

The first type of informal marriages is nok dankai. This type of marriage is very common among the Rabhas. It rates higher than any other form of marriage. This type of marriage takes place when a marriageable girl comes to the
The house of an unmarried young boy at her own initiative to be his wife. This may be called a type of love-marriage among the Rabhas.

Whenever a girl comes to the house of an unmarried young boy to be his wife the father or guardian of the boy immediately informs the matter to the villagers and clan-members. For this purpose the father or guardian of the boy invites the villagers and clan-members to his house and informs the matter. The village deuri is sent for who slaughters a tender cock in the name of Risi Bai. The boy and the girl get recognition as husband and wife from this day onward who receive khengetong from the elderly persons by touching their feet.

The boy's father or guardian arranges a feast after one or two months to which all the villagers, relatives and clan-members are invited.

2. Jangoi dankai

The second type of informal marriage is jangoi dankai. If a man has no son but has a marriageable daughter he can select a hard working young boy with good moral character to live in his house as his son-in-law.

Once the parents decide to keep a young boy as the husband of their daughter, their first task is to search for a boy. A jorkai man is engaged for this purpose and it is he
who carries on negotiations. If a boy is not acceptable to the parents of the girl they will search for another. On the other hand if he is acceptable, the father of the girl will invite the villagers and clan-members to his house and express his and his wife's chabri (desire) to keep the boy as their son-in-law in their house. In the same meeting a day is fixed for a simple marriage ceremony with a community feast. On the prescribed day the boy comes to the house of his would be father-in-law accompanied by a few relatives and clan-members to live permanently in the latter's house as his son-in-law. When the boy is about to enter the house, the girl comes out of the house to receive from him a khusung khapak (a shield) and a toral (sword) which the boy carries invariably.

The boy and the girl then receive khengetong from the elderly persons. The village deuri slaughters a tender cock in the name of risi Bai.

With the community feast the marriage comes to an end. The relatives and the clan-members of the boy leave the house in the afternoon.

3. Lara larini

The third type of informal marriages is lara larini. It is a marriage between a widow and a widower. Whenever a widower wants to marry a particular widow, he first arranges a preliminary discussion with the widow's father or guardian
through a middle man. The father or guardian consults his daughter or ward as the case may be and if she agrees to the proposal, he informs the widower accordingly.

The widower then calls the villagers, clan-members to his house and expresses his desire for a marriage with the widow of his choice. If the widower is sufficiently young for a second or a third marriage, they give their consent, otherwise not. If consent is given, they settle the question of the children, if any, by the previous husband of the widow in the same meeting.

The widow must take the formal permission from the nearest women members of her clan before she marries someone. This is called khaum (permission). This is a simple ceremony and can be held only after three months from the date of her husband's death. Thus no widow can marry for second time immediately after the death of her husband. A period of three months must elapse from the date of the death of her husband for her second marriage. A date is fixed for this purpose and the widow invites her nearest clan-members to her house to obtain the formal permission from the clan-members in the meeting.

On the day of marriage the widow comes to the house of the widower to be his wife. A few relatives and clan-members accompany her. The widower entertains the villagers, relatives and clan-members on this day.
The widow's father or guardian cannot accept ga-pon.

The following is a table showing the percentages of various types of marriages:

Table 2

(i)
Types of Marriage with Percentage (General)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Type of Marriage</th>
<th>No. of Couples</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Bhari sinkai</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Nok dankai</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Jangoi dankai</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Lara larini</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total No. of Couples 300 100%

(ii)
Types of Marriage (Sub-groupwise)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Type of Marriage</th>
<th>Rongdania</th>
<th>Waitoria</th>
<th>Pati</th>
<th>Dahuria</th>
<th>Baitlia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Bhari sinkai</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Nok dankai</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Jangoi dankai</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Lara Larini</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total No. of Couples 60 60 60 60 60 60
It is interesting to note that there were 195, that is 65 per cent cases of nok-dankai, an informal type of marriage whereas only 78 or 26 per cent were married formally (bhari sankai type). Next comes the number of jangoi dankai with 21 cases. Lara larini occupies the last position with only 6 cases.

BRIDE-PRICE

When there is a bhari sinkai marriage, bride-price is paid to the bride's parents; but if there is nok-dankai, jangoi dankai or lara larini, no bride-price is paid. It is a general rule that the bride money should be paid two or three days before the date of marriage.

The acceptance of bride-price had its heyday in the Rabha society till about fifty years ago; but owing to commendable service done by a few dedicated social workers it came down. At present it is a very small amount*.

DIVORCE

Divorce (pan chira) is permitted by mutual consent; but it is generally a rare phenomenon amongst them. Only five (1.67 per cent) cases of divorce were found in the present

* The average bride money at present is Rs. 25/- only. Data was collected for this purpose in different localities. The amount vary from Rs. 20/- to Rs. 30/- only.
survey. Divorce is sought for various reasons: if there is doubt about the fidelity of one's spouse or if the woman elopes with her lover or if the husband is impotent.

At the time of divorce, the full bride-price (if any) is returned to the other party. Other valuables which were given by the either party are also returned. Male children of a divorced couple remain with the father and the female children with the mother. A final decision is taken by the village council on such matters. During the lactation period a child goes with the mother but comes back to the father when the lactation period is over.

A husband cannot divorce his wife during pregnancy.

A divorced wife goes to the house of her parents or to the house of her lover, if she has any.