Chapter VI

SOCIAL CUSTOMS AND RITES RELATING TO MARRIAGE, BIRTH AND DEATH ETC

I Marriage : Some Notable Features

Marriage being the most important social institution covering the life cycle, a very large body of customs and rites are built up around it, and the bulk of these customs and rites have an important significance from both sociological and the cultural points of view. We are taking up for discussion the more important and peculiar of such rites and customs prevalent in the district.

(a) Age of Marriage

One noteworthy feature in Goalpara is the comparatively early age of marriage in case of girls practically among all sections of the people.

Allen observed in 1905 that 'in Goalpara the followers of both these religions [viz. Hinduism and Muhammadanism] marry their girls at a much earlier age than is usually the custom in Assam.'¹ This practice he contrasts with that prevailing in the rest of Assam. 'In Assam proper, it is quite the exception for marriage to take place before the age of puberty, but in this respect Goalpara unfortunately conforms to the custom of Bengal ... the Muhammadans of the district are, if anything, still more addicted to the practice. Even the animistic tribes marry earlier than is usual in Assam.'² The situation

---

2. Ibid.
appears to have changed appreciably since then, but girls are even now married fairly early in Goalpara.

In case of men, however, early marriage is not so common and a young man is not expected to get married before he is able to support himself.

(b) Bride-price

A most striking feature of marriage in Goalpara is the importance attached to bride-price. While the custom of taking and giving bride-price is prevalent in almost all parts of the district, it is more deep-rooted in the western parts where settlement of the bride-price is regarded as most vital for the finalization of a matrimonial deal. In fact, the local expression for giving a girl in marriage in these parts is becheyā khawā which literally means 'selling off and using up the proceeds'. As giving a girl in marriage almost invariably involves the taking of money in the form of bride-price it comes close to selling her off, and hence the term becheyā khawā (or biliyā khawā in some areas). It has been suggested that it may be a relic of the system of marriage by purchase.

In 1905 Allen had found the practice of taking a bride-price to be almost universal, 'even Brahmins receiving money for their daughters.' Conditions have since changed considerably and the practice is no longer favoured by the high caste Hindus. Among the Rajbansis, however, the custom is still adhered to, although changed

social conditions seem to have brought in changes in attitudes and values. Thus, the formality of fixing a bride-price is now gone through more as a mark of respect to a time-honoured custom than as a serious monetary transaction.

The bride-price is called pan¹ (normally pronounced as pon) in the westernmost parts, gāo dhan in the eastern parts and khālti in the middle parts.

The bride-price of course varies considerably depending on a number of factors like the resources of the guardians of the prospective bride-groom, the status and prestige of the family of the bride and, of course, the health, accomplishments and looks of the girls. A healthy girl good at household duties is considered more desirable and fetches a higher bride-price. Fair and good-looking girls also have a better prospect of bringing a good bride-price than dark and ugly ones. As a rhyme jokingly says:

The bride-price is a thousand rupees,
But the bride is dark-complexioned.

Allen had found in 1905 that the price asked for a girl varied from Rs 20 to Rs 1000, the average being about Rs 100.² Even now the amount is seldom found to exceed Rs 1000 while Rs 200 seems to be regarded as a fairly good amount. In a folk-song a girl complains to her brother that she has been married off to an inhospitable and unlikeable place for the bride-price of two hundred rupees.

---

¹ Pan is an important institution connected with marriage in Bengal; but there it does not mean bride-price. On the contrary, it involves the payment of dowries to the bride-groom's guardians by those of the bride in the form of cash, jewelery and other valuables.

However, sometimes a girl may be offered completely free from the encumbrance of a bride-price and it is then called ohodamé dewa \(^1\) (giving away gratis).

The customary obligation on the part of bride-groom or his family of making payment to the bride's guardians has resulted in the peculiar institution of ghar-jiya (or ghoro-jiya \(^2\)). A ghar-jiya is a son-in-law who lives in the family of the in-laws. The institution must have originated when the custom of payment of bride-price was rigidly followed and a groom who was too poor to pay the price had to serve his father-in-law for a period sufficient to redeem him of the obligation to make the payment. \(^3\) This is, in essence, marriage by service. However, in course of time the ghar-jiya system has come to be regarded as a recognised form of marriage resorted to by consideration not necessarily arising out of the groom's inability to pay the bride-price.

---

1. The term is particularly popular in the Salkocha area.


3. This system of getting a wife has also been prevalent in North Bengal. 'A young man who has no parents often works for a wife in the old patriarchal manner. He goes to the house of the girl's parents and lives with them and after working for them from one to seven years, the girl is given to him for his wife. A man who adopts this method of getting a wife is known as a ghor-jiya.'—J. F. Grunning: Jalpaiguri Dist.Gaz., 1911, p.35

According to C.C. Sanyal, in North Bengal 'this also comes under regular form of marriage. In this case a suitable orphan or poor boy who cannot pay the bride price is brought to the house of the girls and made to work as a servant for some period, sometimes extending upto ten years. In some cases a probation for only two months is considered enough. During this period he is not allowed to have any sexual intercourse with the girl with whom he is likely to be married. When the would be father-in-law considers that the period of probation has ended, the boy and the girl pass through a regular form of Phul marriage [see next section] and they become man and wife.' — The Rajbansis of North Bengal, p.94.
(c) The Go-Between

The go-between is an important figure in the field of marriage especially in west Goalpara. Variously called ghatak, bhātāyit, and kārbāriā in different parts, he plays a significant role in the initial stages of negotiations. It is he who establishes contact between the families of the bride and the bridegroom and normally it is through him that the fixation and transaction regarding bride-price takes place. Often the blame for a bad match goes to him. A marriage song says:

If our bride encounters misery,  
The village go-between will get the blame.

In another song the mother of a girl soundly rebukes the ghatak for misleading her into giving her daughter in marriage to a poor family, the real information about whose pecuniary condition was concealed from her.

In the hope of having them as relations  
I married off my tender-aged daughter  
to the family of aldermen.  
O, they only call themselves aldermen,  
But they have to buy rice for their meals  
[For they have no farming land]  
I kick on the head of the ghatak [who brought about such a match].

II  Different Forms of Union : Attitude towards Divorce, Widow Remarriage, etc

In Goalpara, particularly among the Rajbansis, several forms of marriage or rather, union between man and woman, are prevalent and are accorded different degrees of social approval or sanction. Apart
from the forms accepted as respectable, there are some that are tolerated but not formally approved, and still others that are frowned upon. As quite a number of these forms of union involve widows or divorced women, it will be more appropriate to analyze the society's attitude towards widow-remarriage and divorce.

The Rajbansis and some other communities take a liberal attitude towards divorce and widow-remarriage. Divorce (chāri-dewā, lit. abandoning) is rather easy and fairly common. Generally, a simple process of tearing off of a betel leaf (pān chira) by the two parties is resorted to. Sometimes even mere mutual consent is considered enough. A divorcee male or female, faces no social disapprobation and is considered fully eligible for remarriage. Similarly, a widow, particularly if she happens to be young, incurs no public criticism if she marries again. A young and beautiful widow or divorce may be considered more desirable than a good-for-nothing virgin although such a marriage does not enjoy the same kind of respectability as a 'regular' marriage. (Even widowed or divorced daughters often fetch bride-prices to their parents to whom the daughters generally return after having lost, or being separated from, the husband).

A regular form of marriage is called biyā or biyāo; a regularly married person is biāsta (male) or biāsti (female). The form which is considered the most respectable and which receives the best approval of society is that in which a man, preferably previously unmarried (phul pāttar) marries a virgin bride (phul koīna). This kind of marriage is called phul-biyā/biyāo and by a regular marriage people generally mean this kind. But apart from this there are several other forms of marriage, both regular and irregular.
The *ghar-jiya* system of getting a wife is, as we have already noted, regarded for all practical purposes as a regular form of marriage and no social stigma is attached to it, especially when the groom is an eligible bachelor. In some cases regular *phul-biya* rites are gone through after the end of the probationary period. But often they are also dispensed with. And yet the society does not withhold its sanction to such a union.

But when a man marries a widow or a divorced woman, although social sanction is not withheld, the marriage does not enjoy the same kind of respectability as a *phul biyao* or even a *ghar-jiya* marriage. The remarried widow is called a *dhemni* or *pāsuā*.

Among the Muslims a regular marriage is called *nikā* and marriage with a widow is called *kāin*. Divorce is *talāk*.

But society not only refuses sanction but also thoroughly disapproves of a union in which a man goes to live with a widow or a divorced woman. Such a man is called a *dhokā* in the eastern parts and his prestige in the society is extremely low. The Rajbansis in the western parts call him a *dāngua* and regard such a man with the utmost of contempt. The social disapproval in such a case is so great that it almost leads to a kind of ostracism. The widow who

1. The position of *dāngua* is similar, if not worse, among the Rajbansis of North Bengal also. *A dāngua* is a man who lives with a widow as her husband and is kept by her; he is looked down upon by the Rajbansis and is considered an outcast; the woman can turn him out of her house at any time. So great is the disgust with which he is regarded by his caste people that it is said that if a cow dies and a *dāngua* removes the carcass from the cowshed, even the vultures will not eat it. Another story is that elephants will refuse to eat rice which has been tied up in grass and offered to them by a *dāngua*. See J.F. Grunning: *Jalpaiguri Dist. Gaz.*, 1911, p.35.
thus keeps a dānguā is called a dānguāni and is equally looked down upon. Similarly treated with scorn is a woman who has been divorced by her husband but lives with another man without a proper marriage. When a widower and a widow are remarried they are called shāngānā and shāngānī respectively.

A man cannot only freely marry again after the death of his wife, but he is also allowed to have several wives at the same time. In actual practice, however, very few people are seen to have more than one wife. Another peculiar thing that is reported to have obtained in the past is the tolerance, if not the tacit approval, of concubinage. In fact there was a social institution of concubinage called koinā-pātro—an unmarried girl kept as a concubine—which has practically gone out of vogue in these parts. References to the institution is to be found in Martin: 'A Rajbangsi girl, who has never been married, may live with a man as a concubine, and is called Konyapatro. There is no religious ceremony at the union; but an entertainment is given to render the contract notorious. These women are more respected than the widowed concubines, and living with them is considered as more honourable for the men.'

Inter-caste marriages are not encouraged and whenever such a marriage take place, naturally against the will of the society, the union is disfavoured and the children born out of such a union become the object of neglect and scorn in the society. A union between a Brahman and a non-Brahman, particularly a Rajbansi, is rare but not unknown and the children born of such a union are called moirā. An

illegitimate child is called jaruā or ponga and faces the worst social anathema.

III Areas of Commonness

When the marriage institution of Goalpara is studied side by side with that of other parts of Assam, particularly Kamrup and western Darrang, the two are found to have very wide areas of commonness, largely attributable to a common tribal legacy.

Bride-price had been an important feature of the marriage system of Assam till some decades ago. It was called gā-dhan in standard Assamese, which literally means person-money (cf gao-dhan prevalent in east Goalpara). Similarly ghar-jiyā or ghar-jowāi is an institution known and practised widely all over Assam Valley. Although the institutions of bride-price and ghar-jiyā are obviously relics of marriage by purchase and marriage by service, the latter being a modification of the former, they no longer retain their original significance in the society; the former has turned into a mere formality, very often dispensed with, and the latter into a not very honourable form of marriage. Dhokā, pāsuā, dhemni, are terms with which the Assamese society, especially in lower Assam, are thoroughly familiar. They are still living institutions, at least among the lower castes, which are tolerated, though not practised or approved of, by the higher castes. So is divorce or dissolution of marriage.²

1. H. C. Barua: Notes on the Marriage Systems of the People of Assam, pp.54-58.

2. 'Although the Hindu shastras do not provide for dissolution of marriage, yet the practice is not unknown in lower Assam. A husband and wife, of any caste other than Brahman, Ganak and Kayastha, when
Very similar modes and customs of marriage are also prevalent in North Bengal, particularly among the Rajbansis.¹

In fact most of these customs and institutions themselves bear close resemblance to those prevalent among the tribal societies of this whole region and it needs little reflection to be convinced of their tribal origin. For example, the systems of payment of bride-price and of rendering service to the bride's father in lieu of such payment are to be found among a large number of tribes in North East India, both in the hills and the plains. In the hills such tribes include the Nagas, the Dimasas, the Kukis, the Mizos, and so on. And in the plains there are the Bodos, the Rabhas and others.² The latter not only form a sizeable proportion of the population of the region today, but as indicated earlier, the ancestors of many of the Aryan-ized Hindus and Muslims of the region were originally drawn from their stock. A study of the marriage customs and institutions of the Bodos and Rabhas in particular will show that although orthodox Hindu rites and rituals have been generally adopted by the high caste Hindus and followed to some extent by other sections, the basic marriage customs and institutions of the low caste Hindus of the western Assam region have significant similarities with those of their tribal neighbours.

willing to separate from each other, in consequence of some disagreement between them, do so in presence of their friends and relations, who they call together for the purpose; and catching hold of a betel leaf, each by one end, they dive into, or submerge their hands, under water, and tear the leaf as under, which done, the husband addressing the wife says, "I repudiate you". "I", replies the wife, "abandon you too, and shall, from this day forth, look upon you as my father."¹² Ibid., pp.58-59.

1. See C. C. Sanyal : The Rajbansis of North Bengal, pp.88-100.
2. P. C. Bhattacharya (Ed) : Asamer Janajati. See the articles on the tribes mentioned.
Among the Bodos, including those of Goalpara, bride-price is an indispensable feature of a marriage. They also socially approve of divorce and widow-marriage. Of the different forms of Bodo marriage, the socially most respectable is marriage by negotiation between the families of the bride and the groom in which the fixation of the bride-price is a vital factor.¹ The form of marriage enjoying social approval next in order is that of the resident son-in-law which is exactly the same as the ghar-jiya form described earlier. This is done not only as a means of realizing bride-price from a poor or orphaned aspiring groom, but also when the bride's family has no young man and it wants to have a dependable youth included as one of its members. On successful completion of the period of probation by the young man not only does the marriage take place, but often payment is made to the newly married couple if they continue to stay with the family and render service. Union by the dhokā system (Bodo dankha) is also quite common. A widow generally takes a dankha husband for the protection of the children and property of her deceased husband. A dankha husband has to sever ties with the family of his father. Normally only helpless widows and widowers get married in this process. There are two other forms of union. A girl may go to live with a man of her own accord. In this case the two families later regularise the union. Also, the boy and the girl may elope, or a girl may be forcibly taken as a wife by a boy.² The last

¹. The customary bride-price of a Bodo girl in Goalpara is a hundred and one rupees. — See Bhaben Narzi: Boro-Kachārir Samāj Āru Samskrīti, p.104.

². Marriage by force is also known among non-Bodos in some area and is called jan tānā (lit. dragging the bride).
two forms—marriage/elopement and marriage by force—are, however, not approved by the society.

Bride-price, social approval of divorce and widow-marriage form some of the basic features of the Rabha marriage system also.

Right to divorce is enjoyed equally by the man and the wife and either party can sue for a divorce in the 'court' of the society. Divorce is effected by the pān-chirā rite—husband and wife standing back to back and tearing off a betel leaf in the presence of the assembly of the villagers. If the divorce takes place even when one of the partners is not agreeable to it, the unwilling partner has to be paid a compensation. Remarriage is allowed both in case of a man or a woman after the consort has been lost either by death or through divorce.

Marriage by elopement also takes place especially at the time of the Baikhu festival when young men and women are given considerable freedom to mix with one another, often leading to the choice of life partners. Such unions are later given the seal of its sanction by the society.

IV Modes of Wedding

It is interesting to note that in many parts of Goalpara there are different procedures for the wedding itself. Thus in the westernmost parts, there are two modes of wedding—sājā biyā/biyāō and tola biyā/biyāō—depending on the procedure followed. In sājā

biya, which is more common, the bridegroom's party goes to the bride's house in the evening and the final wedding rites take place there. After this the newly married bride is taken to the groom's house. In the tola biya, on the other hand, the bride is taken by her relations to the bridegroom's house where the wedding rites are gone through. This procedure is generally resorted to when the bride's family is of humble means and that of the bridegroom is rich and influential. In such a case not only is a handsome bride-price paid, but the groom's family also bears the expenses of the marriage for the bride's side.

In some areas the modes are called sajā biya, dam-dumiyā (another name for tola biya) and aher-beher. In aher-beher a party from the bridegroom's side goes to the bride's house in the evening preceding the marriage day with loads of provisions (generally including as castrated goat) with which a feast is eaten in company of the members of the bride's family. The groom and his company comes for the actual wedding the next day.

In South Goalpara, particularly among the Rabhas and Bodos who have largely merged into the local Assamese Hindu society, there are two important wedding-modes known as pākā roj and kachā roj depending on the nature of the feasting arrangements.

---

1. Among the Bodos the normal practice is to take the bride to the groom's house for the wedding.

2. Feasting arrangements figure prominently in a tribal wedding. 'The essential portion of the ceremony is a feast of pork and rice washed down with quantities of rice beer.' — See B. C. Allen: Goal, Dist. Gaz., 1905, p.37.
Various Stages in a Regular Marriage: Customs and Rites Accompanying them

A general idea about the different stages in a regular phulbiya following the sājā biya mode of wedding is given below.

(a) Pre-Nuptial Rites and Customs

Negotiation: Preliminary negotiation (kathāchālā-chāli karā) between the families of the bride and the bridegroom is conducted through a go-between. The proposal generally comes from the groom's side (gāhāk āisā). The initial talks over, both parties wait for a few days carefully looking for omens (mangalā chāwā). Certain signs are considered auspicious and others inauspicious. If, for example, there is a death or a theft in the family, it is believed that the proposed match would bring ill-luck and so the matter is dropped. But if, on the other hand, there is a birth or a fresh acquisition of property, it is interpreted as predicting good-luck and the go-between is asked to proceed further. At this stage, some members from the bridegroom's side go to the house of the bride's father or guardian casually talk about the match and have a look at the girl. If they are satisfied, they again send word through the go-between. It is now the turn of the bride's family to go to the groom's house and to satisfy themselves about the boy and the household (ghar-bar dekha). Then there is a further spell of watching for omens and if everything goes well a priest is consulted. When the priest's approval is obtained, a day is fixed for both the parties to meet, settle the bride-price and also to agree on the date and the mode of the marriage (sājā biya or tola biya). This is pākā boigā (final sitting).
Gondh-tel or Gon-tel-bhājā: After the marriage has been finally settled, the interesting ceremony of gon-tel-bhājā is held on any auspicious day sufficiently ahead of the marriage day. Women of the families of relatives are invited and amidst much merriment, certain articles with aromatic properties (like methi, sondā-pairā) as also flowers and betel leaves dipped in sandal wood paste are fried in oil. Normally it is in the bridegroom's house that the scented oil is thus prepared (gondh-tel literally means scented oil) and it is customary to carry it to the bride's place. But sometimes, the bride's family may also hold the gondh-tel ceremony.

Ākha-gara is an adjunct of the gondh-tel ceremony. A new oven is prepared for boiling the oil for the gondh-tel. The earth is ceremonially brought (ākhar māti tola) from a suitable place after placing a cowrie or small coin near it (which signifies purchasing); it is then kneaded and used to make the oven (ākha garā).

Dhan Bhojer Bhār: Teler Bhār: Juran: It is customary for the bridegroom's family to carry loads of presents to that of the bride from the time of the final settlement of the marriage. The load consisting of fish, curds and quantities of areca-nuts taken at the time of finalization of the matrimonial deal is known as dhan bhojer bhār. In some areas the load contains oil and vermilion and other articles

1. Though no gondh-tel ceremony is to be found in other parts of Assam it is customary for the groom's side to send a bottle of scented oil along with other presents. In Upper Assam there is a ceremony called gathian khunda in which a piece of a kind of aromatic root, called gathian, is placed upon a flat stone, and is pounded with a large muller jointly held by seven married women. — See H. C. Barua: Notes on the Marriage Systems of the Peoples of Assam, p. 17.
and is called teler bhār (load of oil). Some people also call it jānāni-bhār (notice-giving load). ¹

Another load containing presents for the bride along with areca nuts and betel leaves is sent on a day preceding the marriage day and is called juran. The term is probably derived from the verb jur, literally meaning to begin or to unite. In the west Goalpara dialect, to go to finally select the bride is called koinā juribār jāwā. Thus juran signifies the settlement of the union or the beginning of the marriage. Offering of areca nuts and betel leaves by the bridegroom's party and their acceptance by the bride's father (or guardian in the absence of the father) constitute the most important parts of this ceremony. ²

In the south, particularly among the Pati Rabhas, people from the bridegroom's side pay several visits to the bride's family. Areca nuts have an important role to play in these visits. When the bride's side agrees to the match, present-giving ceremonies called mālansa and pān-chini ³ are held some days before the marriage day.

1. The system of sending loads of presents (bhār) to the bride's house is followed throughout Assam. In Upper Assam an aspiring groom makes several such presentations. - See H. C. Barua: Notes on the Marriage Systems of the Peoples of Assam, pp. 42-44. In the colloquial Assamese of the area, bhār pelowa (literally, putting down the load) means 'to make presents to the bride's party signifying final settlement of a marriage.' (Chandra Kanta Abhidhan)

2. Joron or Joran in Upper Assam means 'the ornaments, clothing etc. sent from the house of bridegroom at the commencement of a marriage' (Ibid.) and the presentation of joron is one of the most important pre-nuptial rites. In Lower Assam, however, the term joron is not so popular, but the rite, equally important, is called teler bhār.

3. The term pān-chini is also used by some people in the north bank to designate the present-giving ceremony.
After these preliminaries comes the wedding proper, the rites of which are spread over two days—the marriage day and the day preceding it.

**Bairāti:** Before we describe the rites of the wedding proper, it will be appropriate to give an idea about the bairātis and their functions. Bairātis are considered to be most essential functionaries in a marriage, especially at the bride's place and they play a most important role in the marriage proceedings. They are married women, with their husbands living, generally drawn from among the female relations of the family. But often outsiders are also engaged; they may even be professionals. There are generally a pair of them; sometimes only one. They are charged with the performance of or assisting with, all the important auspicious rites and other ceremonial chores that need special attention. Thus, cleaning the spots for the sacred rites, carrying the chāilen-bāti (a bamboo sieve containing lighted earthen lamps, considered particularly auspicious), offering ceremonial welcome, handing over the articles needed for the sacred rites, and so on—the bairātis have to assist in all these.

1. Although bairātis are not found in the marriage ceremonies in other parts of Assam now, they are mentioned in old Assamese texts. For example, Usha Parinaya by Pitambara contains the following:

Indre devagana loiyā sabhāta basilā goiyā
Apune sati bhoi goilā bairāti

In the Bodo marriages, the bairātis (pron. bairāthi) have a special role in the performance of rites and other functions. In the Bodo language bairāthi means a married woman who has her husband living. See Bhaben Narzi: Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Samskriti, p.93.
Adhibās: The day preceding the marriage day is called adhibās (pron. odibās) the most important rite of which is the ceremonial bathing of the bride or the bridegroom. Women smear turmeric paste on the body of the bride or the bridegroom and the bath is taken in their presence at a specially erected platform, usually made of banana-bark. The bath over, the bride or the groom is given new clothes to wear. Both the bride and the bridegroom have to start observing a fast on the adhibās day which they can break only after the marriage is over. They have to follow many other restrictions. The adhibās rites are normally more elaborate at the bride's place. Before the ceremonial bath, oil is poured on her head with a stone held on it. The vermilion mark is also ceremonially applied on her on this day.

Sarāg-pāni, chorā-pāni: The ceremonial bath is given only with water that has been collected with special ceremonial rites. A party of women go to a nearby river or pond very early in the morning carrying pitchers. They are accompanied by two bairātis with chāilon-bāti and often by the band. At the river or pond two lighted earthen lamps are floated in the water and from the manner in which the lamps behave the women playfully predict whether the match is expected to be happy and fruitful or otherwise. The pitchers are then filled with water and carried home amidst the ulu sound. This water is called sarag-pāni or chorā-pāni.

Soāg-chāti: On the adhibās day a special lamp, called soāg-chāti, is lighted and kept in the bride's room. It is supposed to keep burning continuously till all the marriage rites are over.
Soag tola: The mother of the bride (or groom) goes to a nearby source of water with a winnowing tray containing such articles as a spud, a new napkin (gamsā) seven cowries, seven pieces of raw turmeric. She makes a small earthen mound on which she plants some broom-sticks, all the while keeping her mouth filled with water. On coming home, she ties a cotton cord in the bride's (or groom's) hand. The napkin is spread over the head of the bride or groom and the articles of the winnowing fan are placed on the spreadout napkin and back on the winnowing fan. The process is repeated several times.

Dagar-Barā: This literally means the welcoming of the drum. A band consisting of the dhol, the karkā, the shānāi, and the kāshi is considered almost a indispensable for a marriage and it is customary to welcome the party on arrival at the house. (Usually the party arrives on the adhibās day). Without the ceremonial welcome, which a bairāti performs with a new cloth, some rice and seven cowries etc., the band would not start playing.

The Wedding Day: An important function in the day time on the marriage day is the performance of the nāndi shrāddha by the father of the bride or groom, or any other senior male member of the father's line, done under the supervision of a priest who is usually a Kamrupi Brahman.

The marriage itself takes place in the evening. As soon as the bridegroom's party arrives, people on the bride's side go out to the entrance with welcoming aides and a ceremonial welcome (baran) is
accorded to the groom. Often obstructions are placed on the way of
the party by groups of men and women, who playfully demand contribu­
tions and on being satisfied shower blessings on the groom. This is
called ḍāṅgar dhārā. The father (or guardian) of the bride conducts
the groom to the marriage pandal which is specially prepared with
banana saplings and other accessories (mārowa). Here, surrounded by
the assembly of people from both sides, sit the groom and the father
(or guardian) of the bride and they perform the shastric rites as
administered by the priest. When the groom's party brings a priest,
both of them work together.

The important shastric rites are the fire sacrifice (ḥom
purā), giving away of the bride (kanyā dān or sampradān), the offer­
ing of puffed rice helped by a younger brother of the bride (khoi tolā)
tying of the nuptial knot (logun gāthi), and the stepping on seven
betel leaves by the bride etc.

After the shastric rites are over, the couple is taken inside
the house where the women perform some traditional local rites. One
of these is called āg chāul dhup chāul, according to which the senior
female relatives of the bride bless the couple by moving a duni con­
taining rice, bananas, incense sticks and burning lamps etc. and
throwing rice at them. Some sweet dishes are placed before them, and
they are expected to smell them but not eat them. After this the

---

1. The groom is always accompanied by a friend called mittar or mistar.
He is the best man of the groom and has a ceremonial function to
perform. He is formally installed by the groom and is chosen from
among his best friends. Apart from keeping him company and assisting
him in the performance of the rites, the mittar, is said, also
serves the purpose of thwarting the attempts of evil doers casting
spells and charms on the groom. Some people also follow the prac­
tice of taking with the groom a barber, who performs some peculiar
rites.
• bride and the grooms are made to play some of games (khotuā khelā, pāshā khelā). For example, a ring is kept concealed in a quantity of rice in a pan and the bride and the groom are asked alternately to find it. The one who finds it wins.

(c) Post-Nuptial Rites

Bāsi-Biyā: The following morning, it is bāsi-biyā and some more traditional rites are gone through. The most important of these rites is the bengur ghurā. A small structure is made of banana plants and split bamboo (beū, bengur). The bride and the bridegroom are made to go round this structure and then are seated inside it where they are given a ceremonial bath. After this, the bridegroom puts the vermilion mark on the bride's hair-parting. Some people also have the custom of making offerings, numbering 2 or 25, to the sun. After this the couple leave for the groom's house in the company of his party.

Many people in East Goalpara do not perform these bāsi-biyā rites. Before leaving, the bride is made to sprinkle paddy seeds in the houses, particularly the granary. She also carries some seeds to the groom's house where she similarly sprinkles them.

At the Groom's House: As soon as the party arrives at the groom's house, the couple is given a ceremonial welcome in the traditional manner. The mother of the groom sits on a bundle of paddy seeds (dhān topā); the groom and the bride are made to sit on her two knees and she offers them dudh-pāntā (a preparation made with soaked rice, milk, etc.).
Then they are taken to the inner apartments where the senior female relations of the groom welcome the couple with the ag chaul dhup chaul rites. Some times they couple is also made to play games (khotua khela).

In most Rajbansi families, it is customary to hold a Marai Puja just before the marriage takes place and the newly married couple is required to offer worship to the goddess after the welcoming rites are over.

Agrā-khui: An aged woman, often an aged female relative of the bride, accompanies the bride to the groom’s house and chaperons the young inexperienced bride during her first stay in her husband’s house. She is called agrā-khui.

Shagai-Milan: Within a few days of the arrival of the new bride, the groom’s family arranges a feast to which relatives and friends are invited. The idea is to formally introduce the new bride. This is known as shagai-milan. For some people, cakes are indispensable at this feast. The bride is allowed to help in the preparation and distribution.

Some people have another ceremony called randhan dewā or randhan dewni in which the new bride is made to do some cooking and after this she get the formal permission to cook for the family. In the eastern parts it is called hārihāl diyā.

Path-Phirāni: The first coming of the couple to the bride’s house after the marriage is called path-phirāni. With some people it is a fairly elaborate ceremony and rites similar to those of bāsi-biya
are performed. Some people call it ath-mangala and there is much feeding and rejoicing at the bride's place.

VI Rites of Irregular Marriages

We have above described the rites performed at a regular marriage having the highest social sanction.

In case of the irregular marriages, no elaborate rites are performed. For example, in a widow-marriage, the atmosphere is one of restraint and privacy rather than of pomp and general merriment. Only some simple non-scriptural rites called dhup chaul are gone through — with rice and incense-sticks placed before the seated couple in the presence of the assembly of close relatives and friends. A feast is arranged but there is no priest, no band, no singing of marriage songs.

The formalities gone through in case of a dhoka form of marriage are like this. The intending dhoka on getting the consent from the widow, goes stealthily to her house strikes on the roof of the house three times with a stick and on getting a positive response from the widow inside, enters the house. Sometimes, he simply get into the house and starts living with her.

There is another kind of irregular marriage which is called pani-chitā biyā. When a orphaned or supportless boy wants to get married with a girl who is also not better off, the marriage is

1. Some of the rites of the dankhā system of the Bodos are similar. — See Bhaben Narzi: Boro-Kachārir Samāj Āru Samāskriti, p.121.
performed simply by the sprinkling of water (pāni chita) with a mango twig. Often an elderly man or woman who is regarded by the boy or the girl as some kind of a guardian is prevailed upon to take the responsibility of unity the couple by sprinkling the water. The man or woman in that case is called the pāni-chitā bap (or dhormiya bāp) or teldhara-māo (dhormiya māo) respectively and are treated as a sort of god-father or god-mother respectively by the couple.

Sometimes a couple, living together as husband and wife, but not married according to any of the recognised methods, go through the pāni-chitā rites with the purpose of regularising the union. A Brahman priest may also be engaged. This is done when the couple wants to give the children born out of the union a legal and social status, especially before the marriage of one of the children is to take place. In other parts of Assam, exactly similar customs are prevalent and the rites performed are called 'āg chāul diya'.

VII Muslim Marriage Customs and Rites

It is interesting to note that some of the marriage customs prevalent among the local Rajbansis (and some others) e.g., divorce widow-marriage and marriage with a divorcee, are such that they have sanction in Muslim religious law and as such, in these respects the local customs conform to the authorised Muslim practices. But the conformity between the marriage customs and rites of the local Muslims with those of the local Hindus (particularly the Rajbansis) extend over a much wider field; and there is, thus, a remarkable degree of

homogeneity among the Muslims and a large section of non-Muslims so far as marriage rites and customs are concerned.

In fact, excepting the strictly religious portions of the rites, which are of course conducted according to the orthodox Muslim religious prescriptions, most of the other rites followed by the local Muslims have been so identical with those followed by the most numerous section of their local Hindu neighbours that many of these practices are now being discontinued by Muslims as being patently non-Islamic.

However, the local Muslims formerly used to have the services of go-betweens and there was the practice of demanding and paying bride-price. Though these practices are now disfavoured, the negotiation proceeds in a manner similar to that described earlier. Only in place of the bride-money, the contract-money (mohar) according to Muslim rites is fixed. Muslims also use the expression juribār jāwā to designate the formality of the final settlement of the marriage with a girl. Loads of presents (bhar) and juran are important pre-nuptial ceremonies. The presents sent from the groom's side with the juran include a new cloth called shingreni kāpur (which is often a red-bordered sari), vermilion, conch-shell bangles and other ornaments.¹ Akha-garā is a rite exactly similar to the gondh-tel rite described earlier.

At the marriage pandal there is the specially prepared platform with banana plants planted on four corners (marowā) and seives with earthen lamps (sātāshi).

1. Some popular Muslim marriage songs contain references to these articles.
The day preceding the marriage day is called odibās and the bride or the groom is given a ceremonial bath with water specially drawn from a river or pond in the same manner as described earlier (sarag-pānī or chora-pānī).

On the marriage day, the bridegroom goes to the bride's place accompanied by relatives and friends. He has a special friend keeping him company (koldhārā, similar to the mittar described earlier). It is customary for the groom's party to carry big quantities of sweets (or sugar in the absence of sweets) and guā-pān which are offered to the members of the bride's party. After the marriage contract is sealed with the help of the kāzi and witnesses from both sides, the marriage is practically over. One peculiar custom found in some areas is that the younger brothers and sisters of the bride dip a corner of the groom's wrapper or shirt in a cup of milk, which is believed to ensure the endearment of the bride to the groom.

When the party goes back to the groom's house, the couple is welcomed with the offering of dudh-pāntā. They are also made to play some games called dholuwā khelā (similar to khotuā khelā). For example, coins are put on a sheet held tightly by the four corners and the bride and groom are asked to collect them. Again, a coin is put in a pitcher full of water and the bride and the groom are made to find it.

After a few daws there is also a randhan devā ceremony. Another ceremony that is held at the bride's house is called mājā-pārā. It is a feast to which the new bridegroom and relatives and friends of the bride's family are invited. The bridegroom is formally introduced. It is customary for the bridegroom to bring guā-pān and other eatables on the occasion, which is also called shārāi bhāt.
Formerly, dhol-shanāi bands were considered a must in a Muslim marriage but the custom is now disfavoured by many.

VIII Marriage Songs and Dances

Singing of appropriate songs accompany the various rites performed at the different stages of the marriage and in a way, forms a part of the rites. Be it a Hindu marriage or a Muslim, a Bodo marriage or a Rabha, marriage songs are invariably sung. Coupled with the dhol-shanāi bands, these songs help to make the marriage very much of a musical affair. In Muslim marriages there is in addition the practice of dancing, especially at the bride's house. Women, while singing marriage songs, also perform dances surrounding the bride. These songs and dances make a local Muslim marriage a most colourful affair. Songs and dances are performed in a big way in the Bodo and Rabha marriages also.¹

IX Rites observed at Child-birth

In the villages, the services of a midwife are requisitioned who helps the mother with the delivery and also performs such essential functions as cutting the naval cord and giving the baby and the mother the attention needed at the time.

The traditional practice is to put the new-born baby on a winnowing tray (kulā) upholstered with straw. A smouldering fire is kept constantly burning with paddy husking. A sickle or a chopper is

¹ For specimens of and a discussion on the marriage songs, see Chap VIII. Specimens of tribal marriage songs are to be found in Chap X.
placed under the 'bed' where the child is kept and also under the mother's bed as a precaution against the danger from evil spirits.

The whole family, especially the mother and the child are considered to be in a state of uncleanness (chhuā). The first step towards the removal of the unclean state takes place on the performance of a simple function on the fifth or seventh day. This is called ek kāmāni. On that day often a Brahman is brought in to read the fate of the child (ganarā) and the naming of the child takes place. Fish and seatmeats may be distributed.

On the completion of one month, a more elaborate ceremony for removing the uncleanness (chhuā kāmāni) is held. A thorough cleaning operation—washing and scrubbing and sprinkling of sacred water—is undertaken and after this the state of uncleanness is completely removed.

The main ceremony is usually held in the courtyard where a banana sapling is planted. The mother makes offerings to the sun-god, usually with the assistance of a Brahman priest. The child is placed on a low flat stool (pirā) on which a new cloth has been placed. Four small bows and arrows are placed on four sides of the stool and a fifth one is held above. Jujube thorns are placed on all sides of the stool, possibly to ward off evil spirits. The child's hands and feet are rubbed with a ducks egg and the following words are recited: 'Let him have smooth hands and feet like an egg.' A tub of water is placed near the spot and the child is passed across the tub seven times, wishing that it will be good at swimming.
Some other Ceremonies

The first eating of rice-food by the child is the occasion for a ceremony called bhat chuwani (lit. touching of rice) or mukhat bhat dewa (lit. putting rice in the mouth). The high-caste people or the educated sections of the community often use the refined-sounding term annaprashan. Normally, in case of a male child the ceremony is held in the sixth month and in the case of a female child, in the seventh month. But the rule is not hard and fast. Often a Brahman priest presides over the rituals but in most cases there is no priest. Friends and relatives are invited and the elaborately prepared dishes are put before the child. The child is dressed in new clothes and often he is given a head gear (motuk) resembling a bride-groom's headgear. Customarily it is the child's maternal uncle who puts the first morsel of rice into its mouth. Several articles like a ear of paddy, a coin, a book, a pen, etc. are put on a plate and placed before the child and according to the article first touched by the child predictions about the child's future life are made. For example, if the child first touches the paddy, it is said that he will have lots of corn when he grows up; and if it is the coin he has touched, the prediction is that he will become a money man, and so on. From this day, the child is allowed to have rice as food.

Churakaran or the rite of shaving off the hair of a male child is sometimes held but it is confined mostly to the Brahmans. Some Kayasthas and Kalitas also hold it but it is by no means a popular ceremony. Brahmans also perform the ceremony of giving the sacred thread to an adolescent boy.
Jhapur-Nāma: But there is the peculiar custom of jhapur-nāma, particularly among the Rajbansis, according to which the hair of a girl (and not of a boy) is shaved off. There is no scriptural sanction for such a rite and it is based on a purely local folk custom. Jhapur-nāma literally means 'taking down the matted hair' and the purpose of the ceremony is to ensure immunity from the evil eye of a female spirit that is believed to caused matting of the hair. The function is also called Buri Puja.¹

Jāpā Divā: This is a ceremony observed at the attainment of puberty by a girl. On the third day of the appearance of menstruation, a Brahman of the astrologer caste is invited to read the girl's fate. Some women are sent to the house of a relative or a neighbour with a wicker-work basket (jāpā) containing new clothes, ornaments, areca-nuts, betel-leaves, fruits and a knife (phal-kātāri) tied with yarn and also a small bundle called gāji (which is said to represent a baby). On the fifth day, two more baskets are added, and all of them are brought to the house of the girl who has attained puberty. She is given a ceremonial bath after which she wears the new clothes. The phal-kātāri and gāji are given to her and then put back. The idea is to make her conscious of the new physical power of bearing children that she has acquired and also of the responsibility devolving up on her.² There are also special songs sung on the occasion.

This ceremony is found in the eastern parts of the district and is not widely practised. A similar institution is found in other parts of Assam.

¹ The rituals followed on the occasion have been described in Chap IV, Section X.
The Muslims perform the ceremony of circumcising the boys but rites followed do not seem to have any significant local peculiarity.

XI Rites Observed at Death

The rites observed at death by the Hindus are not much different from those observed elsewhere in the region. When a grown up person in the family dies, the dead body is dressed in new clothes and carried to the cremation ground where, after the performance of some scriptural rites, it is cremated. Left over pieces of bone (asthi) from the burnt body are brought home for the future performance of sacred rites. The whole family observes a state of uncleanliness usually for a period of one month. The sons of the dead man or woman wear unwashed new cloth and observe strict restrictions in the matter of eating, sitting, sleeping, shaving etc. These restrictions are not so strict in case of the other members.

On the tenth day there is a small function called dākā or dashā in which the sons ceremonially shave their hair and from that day some of the restrictions are relaxed. At the end of one month, the shrāddha ceremony is held. It is a much bigger affair and relatives and friends are invited to it. A Brahman performs the shastric rites for the propitiation of the soul of the deceased and the invited guests are entertained with refreshments. The state of uncleanliness is formally removed from that date. A further ceremony is held immediately after this, in which selected guests are invited to
a feast in which non-vegetarian dishes are served. This is known as mas-chuāni (literally, touching of fish) which ends the food restrictions the family had so long followed.

Religious songs are generally sung at the funeral procession and at the shrāddha ceremony. In some areas there are special songs for these occasions.