



## **MARRIAGE SYSTEM OF THE APATANI.**

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### **Abstract**

Arunachal Pradesh situated in eastern most part of India is an exclusively tribal dominated land with 110 tribes and sub-tribes. Out of this around 25 tribes including the Apatani are considered as major one which has distinctive socio-cultural features. Marriage is a social institution under which man and woman live as husband and wife by legal or religious commitment. The marriage of an Apatani is generally considered his personal affair in that parents and kinsmen do not interfere to any great extent with the young people's choice of partner. However, there are certain rules of marriage, which an Apatani has to observe in the matter of the choice of a partner and rituals that has to be performed which makes the personal affair a social occasion. This paper attempts to study the marriage system of the Apatani with reference to types, rules and procedures and marital discord like divorce.

**Key Words :** Apatani, Marriage, Rituals, Myoko, Mabo Enchinii.

### **Introduction:**

Arunachal Pradesh situated in eastern most part of India is an exclusively tribal dominated land with 110 tribes and sub-tribes. Out of this around 25 tribes including the Apatani are considered as major one which has distinctive socio-cultural features. With a population of 29,546 (as per 2011 census),<sup>1</sup> the Apatani live in seven major villages. These villages fall into three groups, each of which has a distinct tradition regarding the migration that precedes the Apatani settlement in their present habitat Ziro. The first group consist of single village of Hong, the second of Hari and Bulla and the third of Hija, Dutta, Mudang Tage and Michi Bamin. Each group constitutes for certain purposes a ritual unit.<sup>2</sup> For instance, the Myoko, the annual festival of the Apatani, is celebrated by each of the three groups in turn. The three groups intermarry freely, and there are no appreciable differences in custom. A system of reciprocal rights and obligations welds the seven villages into a closely integrated community, conscious of its national character and distinct cultural heritage.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, an attempt had been made to study the marriage system of the Apatani with reference to types, rules and procedures and marital discord like divorce.

### **Methodology:**

To make a systematic study on the marriage system of the Apatani, a suitable method of data collection for the ethno-historical study which includes – a field study, interview with people, data collection from different sources, primary as well as secondary sources, was adopted. Thus, a combination of documentary, interview method and participatory observation of the author who is Apatani herself, has been employed for clear understanding.

## **I**

### **Rules of Marriage**

Marriage is a social institution under which man and woman live as husband and wife by legal or religious commitment.<sup>4</sup> The marriage of an Apatani is generally considered his personal affair in that parents and kinsmen do not interfere to any great extent with the young people's choice of partner. However, there are certain rules of marriage, which an Apatani has to observe in the matter of the choice of a partner. These rules, make the personal affair a social occasion.



## 1. Clan Exogamy

The Apatani society is sub-divided into a number of clans. In the choice of marriage partners, Apatani have to observe the rule of clan exogamy. Unlike in other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, in Apatani society neither paternal nor maternal cross cousins are eligible as marriage partners. However, a man may marry a girl of his mother's clan provided consanguineous relation is at least of six or more generation.

Breaches of rule of clan exogamy are rare, but if man and woman of the same clan insist on living as husband and wife, a Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*) has to be sacrificed in expiation of the offence<sup>5</sup>. A certain inconsistency is brought into the system of clan exogamy by the fact that some clans are known as 'brother-clans'. For example, Mudo clan and Gyati clan of Hari village are debarred from inter-marriage, while there are cases of two sub-clans of the same clan e.g. Akang Koj and Ayo Koj of Dutta village practicing inter-marriage. The explanation given is that each of these sub-clans has a 'Lapang' of its own, whereas 'brother-clans' forming a single exogamous unit usually share a single Lapang.

*"Lapang is a large, open sitting platform. On this the men of the clan gather for gossip and work, as well as on ritual and other formal occasions. Occasionally two or three closely allied clans may jointly own one lapang, while very large clan may possess more than one such sitting platform".<sup>6</sup>*

## 2. Class Endogamy

Apatani society is divided into two endogamous groups of Gyutii, the Patrician and Gyuchi, the Plebeian. Under no circumstances a Gyuchi ever become a Gyutii. However, these divisions into two exclusive groups are now in no way parallel to the caste system as practiced in other parts of India. The two groups do not markedly differ in their style of living. They freely intermingle with each other except on certain ceremonial occasions, which are strictly observed by them.

The marriage relation was strictly prohibited between the two groups for the reasons related more or less to religious taboos. It was believed by the Apatani that inter-marrying between the two groups may not prosper in future. However, this belief has been proved wrong. Now a days many of the educated Apatani of two groups are not only inter marrying but also are marrying from other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Contrary to the popular belief, many of them are leading a prosperous life.

Nevertheless, the religious taboos are still strictly observed by the Apatani. For instance, if a patrician man marries a plebeian girl or a girl from tribes other than Apatani, they are not allowed to enter the 'Yugyang' (shrine) of Myoko ceremony. However, other contingent ceremonial grounds may be allowed to them where rituals are performed by them for good health and wellbeing.

Apart from observing clan exogamy and group endogamy, marriage is not allowed among 'Bunii-Ajing'.

*"'Bunii' means 'Bonded' and 'Ajing means 'Friends'. Bunii ajings are friends from other villages established or bonded by a ritual called 'Gyotu' under which a Mithun is exchanged. Bunii ajings are inherited by a son from his father and which in turn his son/sons will inherit from him after his death. Thus, once this friendship is established it goes on from generation to generation. Apart from the inherited bunii ajings, a person may also make new bunii ajings of his own which as well will be inherited by his sons in equal number. In case a person dies without a son, his nearest kinsman inherits his bunii ajing. Thus, the ties of bunii ajings are maintained forever by the Apatani. In other words bunii ajing are sort of an alliance formed between two people from different villages in order to support each other morally and materially during the time of social, economic and political crises as well as in conducting cultural and religious ceremonies".<sup>7</sup>*

Bunii Ajings are regarded as one's own kinsmen and therefore marriage with Bunii Ajings are not allowed.



### 3. Monogamy

Though monogamy is the social norm, polygamy is also permitted, but very few men have more than one wife. A man may have more wives if he is wealthy enough to support them or “who have no sons from his first wife, or who have no brothers and are consequently eager to strengthen their lineage by having a number of sons”.<sup>8</sup> While going for another wife, however, he has to obtain the consent of his first wife and her relatives so that he does not have to bear the wrath of his wife’s kinsmen later.

Practice of polyandry is not prevalent in Apatani society though Apatani girls may have greater freedom to choose their partners by themselves.

## II

### Types of Marriage

In Apatani society, the following forms of marriage are sanctioned:

#### 1. Levirate Marriage

In Apatani society the levirate practice is approved but instances of such marriage is very rare. A man is permitted to marry the widow with or without issues of his younger or elder brother. Also solemnizations of such marriages are seen more during advanced age of persons more for providing economic and social security than for begetting children in general.

#### 2. Sororate Marriage

Sororate practice is also allowed in Apatani society. A man is permitted to marry his wife’s elder or younger sister if his wife dies with or without issues. In case the wife is still alive, yet a man may marry his wife’s sister with her consent in case his first wife is barren. Instances of such marriage are also very rare.

#### 3. Child Marriage

Till recent past child marriage was prevalent among Apatani. “The children may be married at an early age. However, a child-bride remains usually in her natal home and visit her husband’s family only during festivals. At this stage she has a much freedom as other young girls and her marital life begins only sometime after the menarche”<sup>9</sup>. Unlike in some tribes of Arunachal Pradesh the prebirth marriage is not practiced among Apatani. In the sixties child marriage was abolished with the help of Apatani Youth Associations (AYA) which is also responsible for abolition of tattooing of face marring the beauty of the Apatani women.

#### 4. Marriage by Capture/Forced Marriage

Forced marriage or marriage by capture was also prevalent in the past. In this form of marriage, when a boy likes a girl, but if she is indifferent towards him or refuses his proposal, then the boy with the help of some of his friends, forcefully capture the girl and takes her to his house. The girl may be captured with or without the knowledge and approval of the girl’s parents. However, instances have been that in most cases of such marriage girl’s parents had been a party to the boy’s design. Now-a-days there is hardly any instances of such a marriage.

#### 5. Love Marriage

Since olden days love marriage has been very popular among the Apatani. In this type of marriage both the boy and the girl declare themselves as life partners after a long or short period of courtship. “There is no need for formal engagement or even wedding ceremony. Once a man and a girl have agreed to live as husband and wife. The girl may then move without ceremony



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to the young man's parental house".<sup>10</sup> However, after a year or two they have lived as husband and wife, they may perform the rituals of marriage.

## 6. Arrange Marriage

Arrange marriage is another type of marriage practiced by the Apatani. In this type of marriage the boy's side must first see an omen by carefully examining chicken's liver before taking any decision. The omen is tested to find out whether the proposed girl will beget lots of children or not and whether she will bring prosperity to the family and clan or not. If the omen favours the proposed union, then boy's parents send a go between or a middleman called 'Gyunta' to girl's parents for negotiation of marriage. Usually, 'Gyunta' is the paternal uncle of the boy. In very rare cases maternal uncle also acts as the 'Gyunta'. However, the 'Gyunta' should not be a divorcee or a widower. On being approached, the girl's parent also see an omen. If the omen favours, they start making necessary arrangements for the formal engagement.

Except in forced marriage and child marriage, in rest of the above mentioned marriage types, it is a must to seek girls consent for marriage.

### III

## Procedures of Marriage<sup>11</sup>

The procedures of marriage system in Apatani community includes the performance of the following rituals:

### (a) Mabo-Enchinii

'Mabo' means son-in-law and 'Enchinii' means to approach or to visit. Thus, this ritual signifies the formal betrothal of girl to boy. On the appointed day, the groom, his father and the Gyunta comprising the members of groom's party go to bride's house in the morning as per custom. However, now a day the number of members of groom's party has increased up to five to include two close friends of groom. Sometimes, the number exceeds more than five which is often resented by the bride's parents as it involves extra expenses, whereby, apart from the sumptuous meal each member of the groom's party has to be given a large piece of bacon as gifts.

The groom's party is warmly received and entertained with rice, meat, and wine made of rice and millet by the bride's parents. Then betrothal gifts are exchanged. The groom presents a Tibetan Sword called 'Chiri' in Apatani to the bride's parents as betrothal gift. Due to scarcity of Tibetan sword, it is now substituted by cash. A nominal value of Rs. 3,000 is presented to the bride's parents on account of non-availability Tibetan sword.

The bride's parents in return present traditional shawl, either a 'Pyaming Pulye' or 'Missang Pulye' as 'Mabo Pulye', meaning son-in-law's shawl, to the groom as betrothal gift. Since it is locally produced it is not substituted by cash as in case of 'Chiri'.

The groom is also presented 'Mabo Yaju' with wine in it. 'Yaju' is a small gourd ladle made of small dried long handle dipper gourd. In different ceremonies 'Yaju' serves the purpose of a ladle for serving wine. However, 'Mabo Yaju' is exclusively for the 'Mabo' i.e. son-in-law. The wine in it symbolizes the blessings of the bride's parents for the prosperity and well-being of the bride and groom.

After the ritual is performed the groom and the bride are socially declared as husband and wife. There are other following rituals, which may or may not be performed by the bride and groom.



## (b) Ari Paniing

After Mabo-Enchinii, the next ritual is 'Ari Paniing'. 'Ari' means price and 'Paniing' means paying. Though it is the groom who pays the Ari (price) it is different from 'bride price' as practiced by other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Apatani do not consider payment of 'Ari' obligatory. However, since this ritual enhances social prestige, the groom's side usually tries to pay 'Ari' sooner or later. Once 'Ari' is paid the remaining rituals have to be performed in the later stages.

'Ari' may be paid on the day of 'Mabo-Enchinii' as is being practiced now a days, and may be paid even after passing of one or two years after 'Mabo-Enchinii'. 'Ari Paniing' is of two types – 'Rutu Ari' and 'Diipa Ari'.

In case of 'Rutu Ari' the groom has to pay a full grown mithun (*Bos Frontalis*) or its nominal value in cash which is fixed at Rs. 8000-16000. In return the bride's parents give paddy, which has to be collected by the groom with the help of his kinsmen and clan members directly from the field. The quantity of paddy to be taken is not fixed. Rather the groom and his party can take paddy as much as they can reap in a day.

In case of 'Diipa Ari' the groom pays 'Hiitu Dore', meaning a calf or its nominal value Rs. 700-5000 to the bride's parents, but do not get paddy in return of 'Ari'. However, the bride and groom may or may not collect a basket full of paddy each from bride's parent's field for 'Pyali', which means seeds for next sowing.

## (c) Rutu Piniing

'Rutii Piniing' is a ritual of collecting paddy from field of bride's side by the groom and his party. There are three types of 'Rutu' – Diirang, Lache and Ari Lache. The type of 'Rutu' is determined by the value of 'Ari' paid by the groom's side and to whom 'Ari' is paid.

For 'Diirang Rutu', 'Ari' is paid to the bride's parents. One 'Subu Anii' i.e. a full grown mithun or its nominal value which is fixed at Rs. 16,000 is paid to bride's parents.

For 'Lache Rutu', 'Ari' of 'Siido Subu' i.e. a medium size mithun or its nominal value of Rs. 9,000 is paid to the bride's brother or cousin brother. In return paddy are collected from fields of bride's brother or cousin brother whoever takes the 'Ari'.

For 'Ari Mechu Rutu', a 'Siido Subu' i.e. a medium size mithun or its nominal value of Rs. 9,000 is paid. 'Ari Mechu' is shared by two persons from bride's side. They are bride's cousin brothers of the same clan. These two people can also be from members of Gyuchi of the bride's clan. It may be mentioned here again that Gyuchi and Gytii do not inter marry each other because of religious taboos. However, members of Gyuchi do take part in the marriage of the girl of Gytii clan to which they (the members of Gyuchi) belong to as they are considered kinsmen of that clan. Similarly, the members of the Gytii clan do take part in the marriage of the girl of their Gyuchi families.

On the day of 'Rutu Piniing' the kinsmen and clan members who help in collecting paddy from the field are lavishly entertained with rice, meat, and local wine by the groom and his parents at the field as well as at the groom's house after bringing the paddy from the field of the bride's parents or brother or cousin brother to groom's granary.

## (d) Eli Baniing

Towards the end of the harvesting season, the bride finally leaves her parental house for groom's house. She is escorted by all her kinswomen and friends. This ritual is called 'Eli Baniing'. It is performed in the same year after 'Rutii Piniing'.

Early in the morning on the appointed day, the bride dressed in traditional attire and ornaments leaves for groom's house carrying the following items:



*“A cane basket called ‘Eli Yagii’ filled with paddy of new harvest, implanted in it two eggs and healthy well grown ginger plant with their roots intact; a small cane basket called ‘Liiha’ with rice powder filled in it; a gourd tumbler called ‘Eli Pinta’, made of dried bottle gourd beautifully covered by finery of cane work containing wine made of millet and rice and a small gourd ladle called ‘Eli Yaju’, made of dried long handle dipper gourd used for serving wine; a chicken cage called ‘Paro Patiir’ made of bamboo, containing a hen with newly hatched chicken usually ten in number or more.”<sup>12</sup>*

All these things are given as blessings for prosperity and begetting lots of children so that she may bring prosperity and happiness to her husband and her-in-laws.

The bride carrying all the items leaves for groom’s house early in the morning. The bride’s kinswomen and friends each carrying a basketful of paddy as gift accompany the bride in a long procession. At the groom’s house they are lavishly entertained with rice, varieties of meat viz., chicken, pork, beef and local wine. Now a days other beverages and food items available at the market have also become a part of the meals served.

When the bride arrives in the groom’s house, the priest performs a rite called ‘Amohinii’. A fowl and a cow are sacrificed for happy and prosperous life of the bride and the groom. At the granary of the groom where all paddy of ‘Rutu’ and ‘Eli’ are stored, a rite called ‘Aping Gabinii’ is performed by the bride under the guidance of the priest or an elderly person. A few larva of dragon fly called ‘Siinitasing’, a squirrel of a particular variety called ‘Takhii’, a few boiled rice ball called ‘Aping Gayung’ and a few baked rice ball made of rice powder called ‘Yatang’ are put in a basket called ‘Pyali Yagii’ containing ‘Pyali’ i.e., seed for next season sowing and also in a pot called ‘Pyali Piichang’ as an offering to the deity of granary for protecting the paddy in it. Besides this rite, another rite called ‘Nesu Yaping’, also called ‘Ayo Assy’, is also performed by the priest to appease the deity of granary. After the ritual of ‘Eli Baniing’ is performed the bride can no longer live in her parent’s house.<sup>13</sup>

#### (e) Mida Muniing

‘Mida Muniing’ is usually last marriage ritual performed by the bride’s parents or brother as an expression of love and affection whereby valuable ceremonial gifts are given to the bride and groom. The performance of ‘Mida’ is not obligatory. It is performed if the bride’s parents so desire. Performance of ‘Mida’ enhances the social status and prestige of the one who performs for their daughters or sisters. It involves huge amount of finances, therefore, it is performed by few well to do people only.

‘Mida’ being a very extensive ritual, it requires a full paper to be devoted to it to properly understand it. Therefore, attempt has not been made to discuss it in detail in the present paper.

### IV

#### Divorce and Remarriage<sup>14</sup>

In Apatani society divorce is not encouraged. However, it is permissible if no other option is left both for husband and wife but to separate from each other. Both husband and wife can seek divorce.

If husband seek a divorce without assigning any reason to the wife, he has to pay a penalty called ‘Embing Yangoeh’ ‘Sarse Yangoeh’. ‘Embing’ means rice, ‘Sarse’ means millet and ‘Yangoeh’ means five units. Here ‘Embing Yangoeh’ and ‘Sarse Yangoeh’ are used as a metaphor for five mithuns and five cows. Thus, a man has to pay a penalty of five mithuns and five cows for leaving his wife without a reason.

If the wife herself wants to leave her husband, the husband is not required to pay any penalty. But if children are involved, wife does not usually leave husband for the sake of children. Yet if divorce takes place, the kinsmen of the wife take care of all the existing properties of the husband is kept reserved for the children from her. However, properties acquired



after divorce may be given to the children from his second marriage. In case the wife elopes with another man, the person involves have to pay the same penalty of five mithuns and five cows to the previous husband. This is called as 'Sih Dudu'.

However, although husband and wife may live separately and also may not have paid the penalty, they are not divorced until either of them breaks a 'Miige' (a bamboo tong used for adjusting burning charcoal or firewood in the hearth), in front of the other. A man may also divorce his wife by giving away a safety pin to her or by cutting a piece of preserved bacon into two pieces in front of his wife. A woman may also divorce her husband by giving away her beads to her husband.

Marriage of a divorcee, a widow or a widower is permitted in Apatani society. The widow or widower may marry any person they wish to. They may also opt for levirate or sororate marriage. A divorcee may also marry any person of his or her choice. Marriage at old age usually do not require performance of rituals of marriage. However, young people remarrying may or may not perform the rituals of marriage.

### Change and Continuity

With passing of time considerable number of changes have been seen in the traditional marriage system of Apatani. Some of the old practices with some added new practices are still being observed with more or less rigidity as before, while some of them have been given up. For instance, practice of child marriage has been completely abandoned after its abolition during sixties on the insistence and initiative of the educated youths of Apatani under the banner of Apatani Youth Association (AYA). Also instances of force marriage have not been seen in past few years. Besides, many educated youths from Gyutii and Gyuchi groups are now inter-marrying each other. However, religious taboos i.e. restrictions of entry into shrine of Myoko ceremony continue to apply to those inter-marrying couples.

The practice, which continues to be observed, is clan exogamy, whether it is love or arranged marriage. Instances of added new practices can be seen in rituals like 'Mabo Enchinii' where number of members in groom's party has increased from three to five and at times more than five which is often resented by bride's side.

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