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SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF EXCHANGE MARRIAGE (WATTA SATTI) IN RURAL AREAS OF JHANG (A qualitative analysis)

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Abstract

Exchange marriages have been practiced for a long time now. People who indulge in this practice consider it to be a guarantee of the safety and security of their female family members who are being married into another family. Watta-satta is overwhelmingly common in rural areas of Pakistan but despite popular belief, it is also practiced worldwide. Couples are usually forced into these types of marriages. This urges us to dig deep into the issues associated with this custom. **Objective:** This study is organized to shed light on the socio-economic elements responsible for this practice, and the socio-economic backgrounds of families taking part in this tradition. Exchange marriage is very frequent in Jhang. **Methodology:** This study used Multi-stage sampling. 3 Villages were decided on through a purposive sampling technique. 15 participants were hand-picked for detailed interviews through the convenience sampling technique. The nature of the study was qualitative. **Results:** This study shed light on the fact that the prime reason for exchange marriage is caste and biradari system where the consent of individuals getting married is not given importance to. Instead, these decisions are taken by the elders of the family or village. Illiterates participate in watta-satta marriages because it ensures a sense of security, loyalty, and mutual benefit for both couples. But it also has negative effects

like incompatibility, disputes, and violence between one couple would automatically create conflict between other couple. Most of these marriages end horribly in divorce or death.

Key words: *Exchange marriages, watasatta, family issues.*

Introduction

Exchange marriage is a complicated and culturally sensitive ritual practiced by many communities worldwide. This research is focused on shedding light on the multi-dimensional features of Watasatta marriage. The goal of the study is to straighten out underlying reasons, ideology, and traditional aspects of exchange marriage. Through this study, we will explore how exchange marriage affects and shapes familial bonding, social norms, and communal structure.

Regardless of local differences watasatta marriages in Pakistan are deeply rooted in traditional values. Exchange marriages provide solidarity and maintain the union of families. We can have a better understanding of matrimonial customs when we understand the subtle differences this practice brings into Pakistani society.

By definition, watasatta marriage means, the daughter of one family marries the son of another family, and in response, the other family marries their daughter to the son of the first family. So the commitment is not just between two families but also between two siblings who are now responsible for the marital success of their sibling, because if one couple has problems in their marriage the second couple will be automatically affected by familial pressure. Observation is that most of these marriages are forced and decided by elders of families in early childhood. This trend is more frequent in rural areas of Pakistan (Zaman & Wohlrab, 2010).

The main motivation behind Exchange marriage is social, economic, and cultural reasons. The families plagued by watasatta marriages are those who worship the ideology of Endogamy. The elders of such families are the sole decision-makers, and they give little to no value to the opinion of young adults who are going to build a family together. Thus the couple participating in this tradition has no say in it, which ultimately leads to zero understanding between the partners, fights, quarrels, and sometimes divorce. These marriages rarely end in divorce because

they know if they take such a drastic step the marital life of their sibling will be collateral damage. So usually these partners stay together which is sometimes even worse because it doesn't only affect the couple psychologically but children are also affected.

The popular belief is that exchange marriage will provide protection and security to both families. But in reality, this custom is a double-edged sword. If one couple has problems among them, the same elders will pressure the other couple to mistreat their spouse. This mutual threat could prevent divorce but does not prevent the psychological and emotional damage both these couples and their children go through. All marriages have some problems which can be resolved between spouses with mutual understanding, but this excessive involvement and pressure of other families being linked to how one couple treats each other ultimately leads to a more nerve-wrecking marital life in comparison to normal marriages (Jacoby and Mansuri, 2006).

Usually, the thought behind exchange marriage is the formation of mutual benefit, understanding, kinship, and lifelong bonds. The people participating in these ancient traditions refuse to see that complicated and stressful relations like these end in physical, psychological, and emotional abuse. Illiteracy and lack of familial support lead to increased instances of disrespect, constant threats, and sexual abuse. Divorce is already a huge stigma in Pakistani societies, exchange marriage just puts more things at stake and makes getting out of a toxic marriage even more back-breaking. Women usually endure all this and stay silent, which breeds deep emotional and psychological damage which is sometimes more dreadful than physical scars (Bourdieu, 1998).

Constant abuse and stressful marital life generate psychological issues like, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and sometimes even suicide. Children brought up in abusive and traumatic environments suffer poor academic records, limited mental and physical growth, and insubordination. These children often grow up being scared of ending up like their parents and therefore refuse to get married at all. Children who grow up in abusive households face 6 to 7 times more psychological, emotional, and behavioral challenges as compared to the ones in non-abusive households (Niaz, 2004).

To form a marital agreement two families exchange brides which are called reciprocals. In the Muslim community exchange marriage between cousins is more common, it ensures the family property stays in the family and is also believed to strengthen lineage (Khuri, 1970). Advances in science have however proven that consanguineous marriages are associated with an increased risk for congenital malformations and autosomal recessive diseases.

In conclusion, exchange marriage is usually a decision taken by men of the family to exchange their female family members through marriage. Undoubtedly more frequent in the East this practice is also found in some ratios West.

Relation to dowry:

One of the reasons playing a significant role in Exchange marriage is the burden of dowry. In hindsight, if two families are marrying into each other, they might waiver the dowry for mutual economic benefit.

Exchange marriage in rural areas is also a way of making sure the land and property stay within the family. Because marrying in barter, both sides wouldn't demand property in haqmehar or dowry.

Marriage practices in the villages

In a patriarchal society, every decision is taken for women by the authoritative men of their families. Even after the death of the head of the house, the power is transferred to the eldest male child. When decisions regarding respect, sexuality, rights, and well-being of women are taken by men who have no idea of the challenges faced by women, the family structure of these societies is bound to turn unfortunate.

Barter of women in marriage is still being practiced at a huge scale in backward areas of Pakistan.

a. Bhain' da wata (Sister exchange)

This is the most classical type of exchange marriage in which the groom marries his sister to the brother of his bride. In bhain' da watta practice usually an older brother marries his younger sister to the younger brother of his bride.

b. Dhee da wata (Daughter exchange)

Dhee da wata is another abhorrent type of exchange marriage. In this type, two elder men exchange their daughters to have a second or third marriage with a younger female. There's usually a disgusting age gap between the couples getting married.

c. Dhee-bhain' da wata (Daughter-sister exchange)

In this category of exchange marriage, one man gives his daughter in nikkah of another and takes his sister in exchange for becoming his second or third wife. So while the first couple belongs to the same generation with a minimal age gap, the second couple has a huge age gap between them. This young female will have to compromise on her life so that it doesn't destroy the marital life of her brother.

Spouse selection in exchange marriage

We have shed light on different aspects while discussing exchange marriage, like sex, lineage, age gap, imbalance of power, etc. Choosing a life partner is a critical and life-changing decision because a good or bad partner can make your marital life heaven or hell. But we have unfolded that in societies where such decisions are taken by elders without considering the needs and wishes of the couple to be married, these marriages usually end up poorly not only for the couple but also for their future children.

Objectives

- To inspect socio-economic features having a hand in exchange marriages.
- To travel over the social and economic backgrounds of the families involved in this practice.
- To work out the repercussions of exchange marriage on a society.

Literature Review:

Willett and Critelli (2010) expressed the popular belief is that exchange marriage creates a stronger bond between siblings, but studies have revealed that problems in one couple automatically create issues between another couple, thus creating irreversible damage to sibling relationships. The females who do take the courageous step of getting out of an abusive and toxic marriage, face backlash from their own families.

Najam (2010) explained that in rural areas there is an immense focus on the property to be transferred within the family only. This social issue gives rise to many social ills like watta-satta, consanguineous marriage, and marrying someone way older or younger. The females have no say in these decisions whatsoever and if someone dares to reject this decision they face immense backlash and are usually cut off in the right to inheritance.

Dawn (2011) shed light on the fact that females of financially poor backgrounds are forced into cross-marriages, it is considered a sacrifice for the family so the family inheritance stays in the hands of male family members and they are also relieved from the burden of dowry.

Zaman (2012) stressed that exchange marriages often end up in lifelong physical and psychological abuse. There's rarely any example of exchange marriage without this dark side to it.

Bhutta *et al.*, (2015) said in exchange marriage, there are some instances where a female is returned to her parent's home as a consequence of her brother mistreating his wife. This female is merely a victim in this situation.

Shah and Jamali (2015) reported that a female is expected to keep the integrity and respect of her family intact at any cost. If any female fails to do so, she is labeled as 'Kari' and is usually killed mercilessly by the male family member without any chance to explain herself. Usually, in these instances, the killer gets away un reprimanded.

According to Mumtaz Noshirwani (2017), it is noted that cousin marriages and watta-satta marriages were established to stop the partition of property, as the size of land and assets was related with supremacy and social standing.

Cheema (2018) highlighted that exchange and cousin marriages were definitely intended to avoid the division of property. Additionally, apart from being deprived of the right to get and own property, women themselves were treated as commodities.

Komal et al., (2023) described in her research Promoting education opportunities for children may increase awareness about the negative effects of give-and-take marriages. Only through productive, healthy, and effective social change can transform this societal norm surrounding exchange marriages.

Materials and methods:

The present study was organized in Jhang. Three villages were selected by purposive sampling. Through convenience sampling, 15 participants were interviewed in detail. The nature of the study was Qualitative. A pre-tested questionnaire was developed keeping in mind the goals of the research.

Findings:

Illiteracy and the caste system served as the primary factors contributing to the practice of exchange marriages. In instances where a girl exceeded the conventional marriageable age due to delayed unions, brothers would make sacrifices for their sisters, leading to disruptions in the overall societal equilibrium. The majority of individuals experienced contentment in their lives, primarily attributed to the security afforded by exchange marriages. Exchange marriages were predominantly prevalent in rural areas, where a considerable portion of the populace lacked higher qualifications, typically holding only middle or matriculation-level education. This demographic often encountered challenges such as separation, divorce, and various physical or mental disorders.

Conclusion

In developing countries like Pakistan, marriage is a bond between two families not just two individuals. Unlike the West, divorce is considered highly taboo. Watta-satta is kind of a practice to make divorce more difficult as it puts so much at stake. Due to this reason exchange marriage last longer and cause fewer problems in the eyes of the family. The backbone of exchange

marriage is mutual security. Thus the families who cannot organize Wattasatta marriage for their children because of any reason, feel like it's harder for them to ensure their son in laws respect and loyalty. These traditions are more prevalent in countries with patriarchal mindsets. Where women are deprived of education and basic rights. The consent of couples is not taken into account as these decisions are enforced by the elders of the family. The restriction that they can only marry into a family with a pair of suitable matches for their sibling hurts the quality of the match.

Watta-satta refers to exchange, this can be positive or negative. In case of an inappropriate exchange, it gives rise to ongoing events of several forms of abuse. As we have discussed before, children who grow up in abusive households are also affected negatively in all fields of life.

Outdated concepts like exchange marriage have no place in the modern world, especially if it comes with the constant threat of "you hurt our daughter, we will hurt yours!". Even the smallest fight between one couple will grope the whole family and put a strain on their counterpart's relationship. Such a stressful environment has an extreme toll on the mental health of couples and their offspring. Consequently, if one couple ends up in divorce other couples would have to get a divorce whether they want it or not due to family pressure and excessive involvement.

Suggestions

1. By bringing a social change we can change the traditional norms of society that no longer serve positively.
2. Education should be made easy and accessible to all because illiteracy and lack of knowledge are the roots of all chauvinistic traditions.
3. Educating newer generations about the negative impacts of exchange marriage will bring awareness.
4. Social media can play an enormous role in educating the public about these issues and how to tackle them.
5. Steps should be taken at local and national levels to devise strategies to minimize exchange marriages.
6. Islam emphasizes the importance of the consent of both spouses before marriage. Legal Actions should be taken in case of forced marriages.

7. The majority of exchange marriages have little to no consent of individuals getting married, which should be a punishable offense. Legislations are required that ensure the freedom of choosing a life partner for themselves.

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