

একুশের ডেউ EKUSHER DHEU

ISSN: 2454-7182

IMPACT FACTOR: 8.158

An International Online Indexed Research Journal of Language, Literature and Culture covering Arts & Humanities as a broad area (Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal, Quarterly)

Love, Elopement and Early Marriage among the Santal Tribes of Purba Bardhaman District



Name of the Author: PUJA SARKAR

Affiliation: PhD Research Scholar, The University of Burdwan; State Aided College Teacher-I, Department of Sociology, Raniganj Girls' College Paschim Bardhaman, West Bengal, India

Abstract: *Marriage is the universal institution and it is necessarily followed by every society. However, one of the dark sides of the institution of marriage is early marriage. Similarly, marriage is sacrosanct custom among the Santal community. The Santals are an ethnic tribal group who reside mainly in West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha and Bihar. They belong to the Proto-Australoid race. In this paper, firstly, I have tried to analyse the marriage custom of Santal tribe and secondly, tried to investigate the impact of love and elopement on early marriage among Santals; and thirdly, this study attempt to analyse impact of social media on early marriage among the Santal tribes, particularly reference to rural areas of Purba Bardhaman district. This study has conducted from the qualitative research approach, and relied on both primary and secondary sources of data. To collect the primary data the study has followed in the interviews and case studies in six different villages of Manteswar Community Development Block of Purba Bardhaman district. To collect the secondary data, the study has been followed different books, journals, articles, NFHS data, UNICEF data and other reports; and also analysed newspaper reports. One of the major limitations of the study is non-cooperation by the government official to provide official data regarding early marriage of Purba Bardhaman district. In conducting this research, I have faced other obstacles that need to be mentioned here, such as respondents were reluctant to share their information due to doubts about the researcher's identity.*

Key Words: Early Marriage, Adolescent, Love affair, Elopement, Social media, Santal Tribe.

Love, Elopement and Early Marriage Among the Santal Tribes of Purba Bardhaman District

PUJA SARKAR

Introduction

Marriage is the universal institution and it is necessarily followed by every society. Similarly, marriage is sacrosanct custom among the Santal community of Purba Bardhaman district. However, one of the dark sides of the institution of marriage is early marriage. At first, we would define the concept of Early marriage. The conception of 'Child Marriage' and 'Early Marriage' largely refers to the same. From the eighteenth century, 'The Age Consent Act', 1891 to 'The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act' 2006, the age of marriage of both boys and girls has been changed over the years. Therefore, Early marriage refers to a marriage, where physically and psychologically immature adolescents get married with and without consent; and cohabit with their partners (Sarkar, 2025:302). In other words, when the sexual cohabitation of two individuals is sanctioned by the society before attaining their legal age is considered as early marriage (Sarkar, 2024:107). Early marriage means a bride and groom is no longer a child rather, an adolescent below 18 years (Sen & Ghosh, 2021). The word 'Adolescent' came from a Latin word 'adolescere' that means 'to mature' or 'to grow up'. In this period girl child and boys are gradually become mature into adulthood which mainly considered the ages between 10 to 19 years. WHO defined 'Adolescent' as "a stage of life between the age group of 10 to 19 years, where girls and boys become physically, mentally and emotionally mature; and changes their behaviour, resulting in the transition from childhood to adulthood¹".

Dhirendranath Baskey in the first volume of his book 'Paschimbanger Adibasi Somaj' mentioned that, there is no existence of early marriage in the Santal society (Baskey, 1987:201). Parents select their daughter and son for marriage only when they are capable for work. Although, there are various forms of marriage systems in santal society, age is not considered important in marriage. In this case, it is believed that any boy or girl will be considered marriageable who firstly has entered his or her puberty and secondly has the necessary capacity in the field of work. They have distinct cultures rituals practices and way of life. They belong to different socio-economic structure and religious background. Notably, the study based on the primary data from the field study has found that, there have been some changes in the marriage customs of Santal community in contemporary times.

The majority of tribal community in Purba Bardhaman is the Santal. As per 2011 census data, the total tribal population of Burdwan district is 489,447(Dutta, 2023:19), of which the Santal speaking population is 5.03 percent². The main livelihood of the Santals is agriculture, hunting and gathering of forest resources. In this community both men and women, regardless of gender or without gender discrimination are involved in agricultural

work. And those who do not have their own agricultural land, work as agricultural labours on other's field.

Comparatively, the trend of early marriage is more hostile among girls than boys. As per the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-2020) data, the rate of early marriage in Purba Bardhaman district is 50.4 percent, women are aged 20-24 years got married below the 18 years (NFHS-5, 2019-20)³. Among the Santal tribes in rural society early marriage is associated with many harmful consequences including barriers in education and health endangers like immature pregnancy, pregnancy complications, mother and infant mortality, malnutrition etc. It's accelerating a cycle of poverty, illiteracy or low educational attainment and poor health outcome. Due to this 'Vicious Cycle' of early marriage, adolescent girls are further facing gender-based discrimination. This discrimination often encourages lack of access of education, affect health, domestic violence, divorce and remarriage and so on.

In this paper I would discuss about three major objectives of my research. Firstly, tried to analyse the customs and forms of marriage among Santal tribe. Secondly, tried to investigate the impact of love affair and elopement on early marriage among Santals; And thirdly, this study attempt to analyse impact of social media on early marriage among the Santal tribes, particularly reference to rural areas of Purba Bardhaman district.

Philosophy of Research

The concept of early marriage can be analysed by the feminist perspective in this paper. Feminism is not just an ideology, rather the main objective of feminism is to free women from social, economic and political discrimination and inequality. Feminism tries to analyse various problems of women from different perspectives. Similarly, early marriage is one of the social evils that would be appropriate to discuss from the feminist approach. Liberal feminists identified gender inequality and socio-economic inequalities between men and women, and the demanded equal rights for women. According to them, women are discriminated against and treated unfairly on the basis of gender inequality. They believe that patriarchal domination over women is deeply rooted in patriarchal societies. Jessie Bernard in his book 'The Future of Marriage' argued that, the marriage system is a fundamental foundation of gender inequality. He also argued marriage system carries different meaning for men and women, where in the case of men's marriage, men have the authority and dominance as husband or a guardian and fulfilled the emotional, physical and sexual desires from their wives. On the contrary, women's marriage refers to a woman being a wife is bound by authority and dominance to her husband and is obliged to provide emotional, physical and sexual services to her husband. Betty Friedan also believes that the marriage system confines women to domestic work, reproduction and childbearing (Chatterjee, 2021:168). Liberal feminist Marry Wollstone Craft argues that women in patriarchal societies are inherently emotional and dependent. Due to the process of socialization women's behaviour is influenced by social, cultural, environmental and psychological factors from the birth of a children. As a girl grows up, these socio-cultural and psychological factors are reflected in her behaviour and functions. Generally, women routinely do their domestic work and plays familial responsibilities; they become 'Faithful wives', 'Observant daughters' and

'Reasonable mothers' (Tong, 2014). Another liberal feminist, John Stuart Mill criticize the marriage laws of 19th century in England in his book 'The Subjugation of Women' and mentioned that, the marriage laws of the contemporary England were a means of patriarchal exploitation and domination over woman (Mondal, 2021:17). According to Taylor, women prioritize marriage and motherhood over there education and future betterment. Therefore, women experience is the adverse consequences of early marriage due to their biological vulnerability. Women are considered as 'Labour of Procreation' to men and are expected to become pregnant as soon as possible after marriage. This is the reason why women face tremendous pressure on early marriage and have early child bearing from their families and Society.

Methodology of Research

To collect the data, this study has conducted on the Qualitative Research Approach, which is followed by both primary and secondary sources of data. The study has been conducted in six different villages in Manteswar block of Purba Bardhaman district in West Bengal- Rajgachi, Paschim Mamudpur, Banui, Paschim Kharampur, Tulla and Monteswar village under two Gram Panchayet (Shushunia and Monteswar) of this particular block. Primarily, purposive sampling method has been used to conduct the study, then, conducted snowball sampling to find married adolescent girls, who belongs to the age group of 14-20 years. The primary data has been collected through case studies and in-depth interviews; and the secondary data has been followed different books, journals, articles, UNICEF reports, NFHS reports and analysed newspaper reports. In conducting this research, I have faced some obstacles that need to be mentioned here, such as respondents were reluctant to share their information due to doubts about the identity of the researcher and especially no information regarding early marriage has been provided by the government officials and so on, which limited the study.

Major Findings and Discussions

- **Marriage System in Santal Tribe**

In Santhal community marriage is known as 'Bapla'. Although, there is disagreement about the origin of the word 'Bapla'. According to several sociologists and linguistics, the word 'Bapla' derived from 'Bala' which means 'equality'. S. Mandi in his article mentioned a quote from Lakshmi Charan Murmu Gomke that, "Marriage refers to equality between men and women"(Mandi,2019:269). In the Purba Bardhaman district, especially in traditional villages, the cultural practice of early marriage is deeply rooted among adolescent girls and boys of Santal tribe. According to the customs of Santal community, when girls and boys of a family reached puberty, their parents arrange their marriages (Mandi, 2019:268). As per the ancestral proverb of the Santal community, "if children are married off at puberty, the parents are free from sins". As I previously mentioned, they have different marriage customs and rules. The father of a girl of a Santal community does not look for a bridegroom, rather according to their custom, the marriage process can proceed only after receiving a marriage proposal from the bridegroom or bridegroom's family. The role of matchmaker is also evident in finding a bridegroom and bride in marriage. The matchmaker

is called 'Raibar' in their community. However, love marriage is accepted in this society. The various forms of marriages existing among the Santals are briefly discussed below.

Kirin Bahu Bapla: The most prestigious form of marriage in Santal community is Kirin Bahu Bapla. This marriage is usually arranged through negotiations after searching for a suitable bride and groom. The role of the matchmaker (Raibar) is important in this marriage. This marriage is performed socially through the observance of their various customs.

Tunki Dipil Bapla: This type of marriage is performed by those who are not financially well-off or cannot afford to arrange a wedding. In this marriage, the groom only has to pay a dowry.

Itut Sindur Bapla: Itut Sindur Bapla is a type of forced marriage. In this marriage, if a boy and a girl are engaged in a love relationship, and the girl's family does not accept their relationship, then, the boy forcefully marry that girl by applying vermilion.

Nir Bolok Bapla: When a love affair developed between a girl and a boy, if the girl proposes the boy to marry and the boy's parents raise an objection to the marriage, then the girl informs the village headman (Jogmaji) about the matter and forcibly enters the boy's house. If the girl can survive for a few days in the boy's house, enduring the insults of everyone, the village headman forces the boy's parents to accept the girl as their bride.

Aur Ader Bapla: In this marriage, if a boy agrees to marry a girl he likes but the girl refuses to marry him, then the boy takes the girl home with the help of his friends.

Sanga Bapla: If a man marries a widow or a woman abandoned by her husband, it is called Sanga Bapla. This marriage system requires less bride price.

Kirin Jawai Bapla: This type of marriage is the purchase of a son-in-law by dowry. If a girl is pregnant for someone and wants to keep the father's identity a secret, then it is necessary to procure a groom for her marriage.

The age-old tradition of marriage system among Santal tribe is in transition and their culture are being assimilated into contemporary Hindu society. The reason behind this change is adaptation of Hindu culture; and impact of globalisation, modernisation, urbanisation and development of the marginal section of the society. Ghurye, from the assimilation approach, described that the tribes have also become Hindus due to their long-term contact with Hindus. However, he uses the term "Backward Hindus" in the case of tribals, he attributes the backwardness of the tribe to their lack of proper assimilation into Hindu society. In this context, Srinivas introduced the concept of Sanskritization. He also believed that through Sanskritization, lower castes or tribes follow the customs, traditions, ideologies, lifestyles, etc. of a higher caste. Nirmal Kumar Bose, in his book 'Hindu Samajer Goron', has shown that although Indian tribal communities are far from contact

with the Brahmin civilization of Hindu society, they still have traces of Brahmin culture in their various rituals and customs. He has termed this process as 'The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption'. Therefore, some changes are being observed in the marriage system and customs in the contemporary Santal society.

- **Impact of Love Affair and Elopement on Early Marriage**

Even in the 21st century there are various contributing factors for the existence of early marriage such as poor economic condition, low educational attainment or lack of education, patriarchal social structure, religious law, political influence, insecurity among parents and so on. But today, one of the most important factors influencing early marriage in both rural and urban areas is love-affairs and elopement. Marriages in Santal community are arranged through the efforts of 'Raibar' (matchmakers) and extended family members. But in recent times, the prevalence of love marriage has been increased among them. Marriage by elopement is also on the rise among the community in Purba Bardhaman. Marriage by Elopement is known as self-initiated marriage, which occurs when a boy or a girl came to know that their parents will not accept their marriage due to inter-caste or inter-religious barriers and over restriction by the family and society. The most common factors of elopement and get married is the engagement in sexual activity together to solidify their relationship or to be satisfy their sexual desires as early as possible. One major advantage of elopement is do not have to pay dowry. Love affairs have two-fold intricate influences on early marriage. Love affairs of an adolescent especially girl, force parents to marry off the girl at an early age, fearing that a premarital sexual relationship will develop due to the girl' love affair. In poor Santal families' girls' virginity and family honour are more like y given priority by the parents, so, parents arrange their daughter's marriage at a young age when they learn about their daughter's love affair. On the contrary, adolescent girls and boys are elope from home and getting married on their own initiative due to their love affairs.

- **Impact of Mobile, Internet and Social Media on Early Marriage**

One of the most crucial means of influencing love affairs in the contemporary era is platforms like mobile, internet, and social media. Generally, due to unstable economic condition, social and cultural norms, less educational attainment, patriarchal social structure, parents are conducted 'Arrange marriage' as early as possible for their daughters. But in contemporary society, the factor of early marriage has been changed. Due to the contradiction between traditional social structure and cultural globalization adolescents are largely influenced by the 'popular culture image', that fostered them to love relationship and early marriage (Chowdhury & Mutsuddi, 2021: 114). Currently, 'Love affairs' is influencing early marriage more and it recognise as 'Love marriage'. Especially, during the COVID-19 pandemic and even after the pandemic situation smartphone and social media has played a significant role in everyday life of the adolescents that creates their lived experiences. Due to the comprehensive use of mobile, smartpone, Internet and social media communication between individuals become more rapid and easier. Through this

rapid and easier communication and connection, early marriage by 'love affairs and elopement' become more rampant in West Bengal.

Smartphone, internet and social media are the products of globalisation. At present the use of smartphone, mobile, internet and social media have become essential in people's daily life especially of the adolescent girls and boys. Nowadays, it is not difficult to use smartphones for adolescent even despite belonging from poor economics background. Therefore, the accessibility of smartphone and internet uses has expanded manifold in the rural Santal society. This active participation among adolescent in social media has been fuelling early marriage. In the context another major fact needs to be discussed here. This study has founded that android or smartphone, internet and social media have a huge dominance on 'first-generation learner', whose parents do not know how to use the smartphone as well as how to use the social media. For first-generation learner, it is being very much entertaining and informative which attract them at a great extent, that provides to get connected and communicated with others in anywhere. Social media can be effective for first-generation learner for getting knowledge about their education and other things, though the random use and misuse of social media and smartphone has played negative role for adolescents. Unfortunately, first-generation learner becomes 'Disadvantage learners' gradually. It has also been evident that, due to parent's lack of knowledge and don't have control over their children's usage of smartphone and social media that fostering love affairs among adolescents, then they take decision to elope from home and get married.

Significantly, the use of smartphone and social media has been played a positive role in society. It has created a positive attitude rather called 'Revolutionary attitude' among adolescents to prevent early marriage. A respondent of my study, stated, the police administration stopped her marriage on the morning of the wedding day because she didn't attain the legal age for marriage. Police stated, an unknown person possibly a neighbour of victim, informed them about the marriage and sent them some wedding pictures on WhatsApp. After receiving the information police came to prevent the marriage and asked the victim's parents to show the age proof of the girl. But parents are unable to prove their daughter was adult. Then police stopped the marriage of that girl.

Conclusion

In British India mainly between the eighteenth to nineteenth century, various social reform movements organised to establish the social status and dignity of girl child and girls, especially revolted against the evil of early marriage. In the 19th century, Indians came to the colonial ideologies, practices and customs and became concerned about the ill effects of early marriage. Indian people realised that, the practice of early marriage constructed a negative perception about Indian customs among the British. As a result, pioneers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Behramji Malabari and many other reformists have started several reform movements from the 19th century. For them, early marriage is a social

malaise or pathological condition of Indian society. We can refer to all these social movements that have taken place in between the eighteenth to nineteenth century to prevent early marriage as the 'First phase of social movement'. The 'Second phase of social movement' refers to the prevention of early marriage through legal provisions and measures and the 'Third phase of social movement' is considered to be the milestone of girls' rebellion against early marriage. However, girls' rebellion against early marriage is most challenging for them, yet today, a revolutionary attitude is being observed among some adolescent girls, which is playing a significant role to prevent early marriage in contemporary society.

Notes

¹eGyankosh.

(<https://eGyankosh.ac.in> accessed on 2nd May, 2025).

²Schedule Tribe of West Bengal, West Bengal Tribal Development Department. (<https://adibasikalyan.gov.in> accessed on 6th March 2026).

³District Level Household Survey

https://rchiips.org>nfhs>nfhs-5_fcts accessed on 18th May, 2024.

Reference

Baskey, Dhirendranath. Paschimbanger Adibasi Samaj. Baskey Publication, vol.1,1987, pp. 192-201.

Bose, D. Vidyasagar Rachanaboli. Mondal Book House, vol.1, 1966, pp. 241-248.

Chatterjee, Subhrajee. Somajtotwa: Lingo, Jounota o Nari. Levant Books, 2021.

Datta, Kritibas. Adibasi Samaj, Tuhina Prakadhani, 2023.

Ghosh, B, Kar, A.M. "Trafficking in Women and Children in West Bengal." vol.36, no.1-2, 2008, pp.83-100.

(<https://www.researchgate.net> accessed on 27th May, 2022)

Ghosh, B, Kar, A.M. "Child Marriage in Rural West Bengal: Status and Challenges." Indian Journals of Development Research and Social Action, vol- 6, 2010, pp.1-23.

(<https://www.researchgate.net> accessed on 11th march, 2020)

Mandi, S, K. Marriage Culture in the Santal Society. Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research, vol.6, issue. 4, 2019, pp. 268-271.

(<https://www.jetir.org> accessed on 30th December, 2025)

Mondal, Malay. Naribadi Tatwa: Ekti Sankhipta Parichaya. Progressive Publishers, 2021.

Sarkar, Puja. "Child Marriage and Social Change in Contemporary Bengal." Social Transformation and Development, Indian Sociological Society and Book Enclave, 2023, pp.88-100.

Sarkar, Puja. "Child Marriage and Educational Attainment: Exploring Revolutionary Attitude among Adolescent Girls in Rural Bengal." Exploring New Horizons of Multidisciplinary

Research in Society Culture Economy and Education, Perfect Writer Publication, 2024, pp.107-114.

Sarkar, Puja. "Development of Adolescent Girls with Dignity and Early Marriage: An Analysis on Legal and Socio-Cultural Aspects in the Context of Rural Bengal." Development with Dignity: Themes and Perspectives, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, 2025, pp.203-215.

Sarkar, Puja. "Impact of Social Media on Early Marriage: A Study in Purba Bardhaman District." Culture and Society, Zykra Publications, 2025, pp.301-308.

Sen, S, Ghosh, A. "Love, Labour and Law: Early and Child Marriage in India." Sage Publication, 2021.

Tong, Rosemarie. "Feminist Thought: A more Comprehensive Introduction." 4th Edition, West view Press,2014.