

## Research Article

# Changing Landscapes of Tribal Marriages in India – A Review of Literature

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## A B S T R A C T

Tribal marriage has seen a shift in years in its form, meaning and regulation because of legislation, education, migration, religion and markets. This review paper tries to bring together the ethnographic, demographic and legal studies on tribal marriages to trace kinship-regulated unions along with the emergent trends of individual needs, delayed marriage and inter-community alliances. Traditional institutions like bride price or dowry and clan exogamy continue to structure marital practices. This paper underscores the persistent gender inequalities and tension between the preservation of cultural autonomy and rights based reforms such as child marriages, domestic violence and inheritance.

**Keywords:** Tribal Marriages In India, Marriage Customs And Traditions, Changing Social Practices, Indigenous Communities, Cultural Transformation, Gender And Marriage

## Introduction

Tribal communities in India are constitutionally recognised as scheduled tribes that historically maintain distinctive systems of marriage based on clan, lineage and territorial identities. Anthropological accounts states tribal marriage as a community based institution on alliances, labour, sexuality and property rather than merely a private union between two individuals (Chandrakantha, 2014).<sup>1</sup> Across regions, most of the tribes practise exogamy in a framework of tribes or regional endogamy preserving identity while expanding networks of reciprocity between lineages. Unions such as cross-cousin marriage in several central and south Indian tribes, and levirate or sororate in others have historically reinforced inter-familial solidarity and ensured social security for widows and children (Bhattacharya & Range, 2025)<sup>2</sup> Of late, the increased social, economic and political changes including the expansion of schooling and labour migration has created development-induced changes in communities and tribes (Gajpal, 2017).<sup>3</sup> These processes have reshaped the normed premises in marriage altering

the age, modalities of spouse selection and expectations of conjugal life (Jeermison & Sahoo, 2018).<sup>4</sup> This paper reveals on tribal marriages in India with a focus on changing patterns, legal pluralism and gendered consequences. Academic scholars working with tribes and indigenous people have increasingly the very thought of traditional versus modern by emphasising the nature of normative authority in tribal societies. Legal pluralism demonstrates that tribal marriages are ideally embedded in multiplicity with the co-existence of customary laws, social rituals, state law, religious norms and other regulatory frames. This is in relation to context and power relations (Merry 1988; Griffiths 1986).<sup>5,6</sup> In India, scheduled tribes follow marriage traditions that are outside the personal laws while they are shaped by constitutional protection, welfare elements and judicial interventions (Rao 2005; Xaxa 2019).<sup>7,8</sup> The semi-autonomous positioning of cultural rituals enable individuals, namely youth to draw upon different regimes to legitimise unions, negotiate bride price or to divorce, or to seek redressal against violence and coercion (Berti 2010; Das et. al. 2012).<sup>9,10</sup>

The changing landscape of tribal marriages is seen from the lens of legal pluralism and intersectional social change through a simple traditional and modern dichotomy. Tribal unions today are negotiated at the intersection of customs, laws and norms with young women and men.

Using these overlapping regimes strategically to pursue education, mobility and protection from harm. A literature review that foregrounds these dynamics can illuminate how continuity and change in marriage practices reflect wider struggles over autonomy, rights and recognition in contemporary tribal India, and can identify the conditions under which reforms strengthen, rather than erode, community-based solidarities

## Materials and Methods

This review was conducted through PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses) principles, adapted for a narrative synthesis. A secondary literature review was conducted to identify ethnographic, sociological, demographic and legal studies on marriages amidst Scheduled Tribes in India.

Through peer reviewed journals, academic books and volumes. Working papers and legal commentaries published in English. The process was carried out across major academic databases and institutional repositories using combinations of keywords related to tribal marriage, customary law, marital practices, demography, and Scheduled Tribes.

Studies include (i) marriage forms, marital norms and patterns (ii) provided ethnographic, sociological or legal analysis (iii) interaction between customary practices and statutory legal frameworks.

After screening the titles, abstracts and articles, the studies were qualitatively connected with the narrative approach. Data were included extracted thematically and organised along five domains: traditional marriage, drivers of change, marital patterns, gender implications and legal pluralism. The synthesis acknowledges regional and tribal heterogeneity and does not attempt quantitative aggregation of findings.

## Results

This section tries to synthesise findings from ethnographic, sociological, demographic and legal literature on marriages among the ST population. The reviewed studies span geographically and methodologically. Taken together the literature highlights the persistence of kinship norms governing marriage and significant transformations based on education, migration and religious change. It is very clear that, marital practices amidst tribal communities exhibit considerable regional and cultural diversity.

To capture the complexity the findings herewith are organised thematically based on chronology. Five interrelated themes emerge – traditional forms and variations in marriage practices, demographic shifts in age, the operation of legalities and gender implications. This thematic organisation enables comparison across regions while foregrounding how customary institutions and external influences interact, revealing the process of negotiating the change. This thematic organisation enables comparison across regions while foregrounding how customary institutions and external influences interact, revealing processes of negotiated change rather than a simple transition from customary to statutory or from “traditional” to “modern” marriage systems.

Xaxa (2004)<sup>11</sup> agrees that tribal marriages in India primarily regulated by kinship norms and community sanctions. It is not based on formal state law (Singh, Rai, Alagarajan & Singh 2012).<sup>12</sup> Clan exogamy combined with tribe endogamy is the root of central organising principle. Marriage negotiations include bride-price, bride’s natal family for loss of labour and symbolically her procreation capacity to husband’s responsibility (Elwin, 1943; Ghurye, 1963).<sup>13,14</sup>

A wide range of marriage forms have been documented across regions, including marriage by negotiation or family arrangement, and marriage by trial particularly amidst Banjara groups with marriage by elopement and symbolic capture (Elwin, 1955).<sup>15</sup> In an analysis of tribal society in India, highlights that marriage practices among tribal communities cannot understand uniform or static.

Marriage arrangements are also based economic differentiation including mate selection, bride wealth, dowry like exchanges and residence patterns. Marriage functions as a social institution as well as a socio – economic status within tribal groups (Shah, 1984).<sup>16</sup> Widow remarriage is commonly practised, especially through levirate and sororate arrangements, and it plays an important role in sustaining kinship ties, providing social and economic support to dependents, and ensuring that bride wealth remains within the family network (Xaxa, 2008).<sup>17</sup>

Karve (1965) highlights the prevalence of cross cousin marriages and other preferential unions, often justified in terms of maintaining close relational ties and facilitating the circulation or return of bride - price. At the same time, significant regional variation is evident. Northeastern and Himalayan tribes maintain distinctive clan structures and strong prohibitions on inter – tribal marriage, even as they allow relatively greater flexibility in couples within accepted exogamous rules (Shimray, 2007).<sup>18</sup>

Demographic census studies indicate that the mean age at marriage among STs has increased with time (Registrar General of India, 2011). In the Northeast, tribal women’s

mean age at marriage is higher than the all-India Scheduled Tribe average, and the spousal age gap has narrowed over time among groups such as the Mao, Paomai, and Tangkhul Nagas (Haokip, 2015).<sup>19</sup>

Educational expansion and the spread of Christianity in parts of the Northeast have been associated with delayed marriage and a gradual shift from arranged marriages towards more companionate ideals (Downs, 1992).<sup>20</sup> Studies from central India report the continued presence of child marriage in certain tribal pockets despite legal prohibitions. This has direct connect to decline in schooling and welfare incentives (IIPS, 2021).

Banerjee and Saha (2018) stated that strictly arranged marriages have increased acceptance of self-choice marriages particularly among young, educated and migrant populations. Migration to labour camps, displacement, conflict and livelihood insecurities have driven and expanded the choice and ways of marriage even among the tribal population (Bavishkar, 2005). Studies of specific tribal groups reported that the importance of family involvement in spouse selection but greater weight accorded to preferences of prospective partners (Xaxa, 2019).

Kujur (2020) stated that elopement and informal unions appear more frequent in families that oppose inter-community marriages. The bride – price practices show partial monetization of dowry like exchanges, hybrid gift systems or partial monetisation. While some communities show movement towards monogamous, nuclear-family-based marriages, others retain flexible arrangements, including trial unions, relatively easy divorce, and remarriage, particularly where customary law emphasises community welfare over indissoluble marital bonds.

Legal and socio – legal scholarship emphasise that the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 does not automatically apply to members of Scheduled Tribes, leaving marriage and divorce largely governed by customary law unless specific notifications extend statutory provisions (Menski, 2003).<sup>21</sup> Village councils and public assemblies typically handle customary divorce procedures, which adjudicate grounds like adultery, desertion, cruelty, infertility or mutual consent (Agarwal, 2018).<sup>22</sup> These forums are generally expected to function in a public and participatory manner. This also frames the marital dissolution as a matter of collective concern. Customary arrangements of dissolution have shown ancient, continuous and reasonable producing a plural legal landscape in which statutory family law and tribal norms co-exist and occasionally conflict (Menski, 2003).

The literature highlights both enabling and constraining dimensions for tribal marriage systems for women. The tribal societies permitted widow re-marriage, divorce and

premarital interaction offering women autonomy (Xaxa, 2008). However, control over land, resources and collective decision-making has often remained male dominated and bride price practices may reinforce the treatment of women as transferable labour (Rao, 2005).

Increased education and exposure to urban contexts can enhance women's power while migration and informal unions may also heighten the risk of abandonment, legal recognition and violence (Shah et. al, 2018). Also, Xaxa (2019) stated that rights based interventions addressing child marriage and domestic violence have begun to reach tribal regions. It is a way of implementing intersects not easily with customary authority structures and notions of honours (Aggarwal, 2018).

## Discussions

This review of literature brings out that tribal marriages in India are undergoing tremendous changes due to the transforming life situations. It is sometimes the social sanction, legal sanction, migrations and changing economic landscape. Core kinship principles like clan exogamy continue to structure marital practices operating within changing demographic, economic, religious and legal contexts that expand possibilities for delay, choice and inter-community unions.

Education, migration, and religious change emerge as key drivers, albeit with region-specific effects. In the Northeast, Christian missions and schooling have contributed to later marriage and a growing emphasis on companionate unions, while retaining bride-price and community regulation. In central and western India, displacement and labour migration have disrupted village-based norms, producing hybrid regimes in which state agencies, NGOs, police, and tribal councils all influence marital outcomes.

Legal pluralism remains a central axis of change. The exclusion of Scheduled Tribes from mainstream personal laws simultaneously preserves customary autonomy and creates gaps in formal legal protection, particularly for women seeking remedies related to violence, abandonment, or property claims. While customary councils offer accessible, culturally embedded dispute resolution, they may also reproduce local hierarchies and patriarchal authority if not balanced by broader rights frameworks.

From a gender perspective, recent scholarship challenges romanticised portrayals of tribal societies as uniformly egalitarian, documenting intra-tribal inequalities and new forms of precarity. At the same time, customary openness to divorce, widow remarriage, and premarital companionship in several communities continues to provide important resources for women's agency when supported by education, collective organisation, and responsive legal mechanisms.

## Conclusion

This review shows that tribal marriage systems in India cannot be understood as static survivals of a pre-modern past, nor as simple extensions of state-centric legal models. Instead, they represent dynamic and negotiated social fields shaped by the interaction of customary norms, statutory law, religious influences, and market forces. These interactions generate diverse and sometimes contradictory patterns in marital timing, spouse selection, marital stability, and gender relations across regions and communities.

Existing research highlights both the resilience of kinship-based institutions and their capacity for adaptation, as seen in evolving bride-price practices, negotiated self-choice marriages, and locally embedded systems of marital dispute resolution. At the same time, notable gaps remain in the literature, particularly the lack of longitudinal and comparative studies that trace intergenerational change and examine how these transformations affect women, sexual minorities, and other marginalised groups within tribal societies. Future research would benefit from closer integration of demographic data, legal analysis, and ethnographic insight in order to inform policy approaches that respect cultural autonomy while advancing substantive equality and protection from harm.

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