

# Marriage: A Sociological exploration of system and Practices among the Nocte Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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**Abstract:** *The study of this subject attempts to unearth or explore how the Nocte performed and practice marriages in their society. An effort is made to examine the subject with the application of empirical study and method. The study is on historical analysis. A valuable data is gathered through field studies and interaction with the people of the community. Secondary sources are also referred to further authenticate the research work. The Noctes are one of the ethnic groups of Tirap District of Arunachal Pradesh, inhabited in the eastern most part of India. They are the worshipper of animism. It also emphasised to study different types of marriage that is popularly practiced by them. Apart from this, an attempt is also made to study on bride-price that is an integral part in the process of marriage ceremony. It also highlighted on the aspect of divorce, which has a social sanctioned in the society.*

**Keywords:** *Empirical, Ethnic, Animism, Bride-price, Ceremony, Divorce, Sanctioned.*

Marriage system and its customs:

In Nocte society, the concept of marriage is the union of two opposite sex. It is arranged by the almighty God for life partner since birth. It is also believed that marriage is solemnized through the blessing of almighty God. Besides, it is a social obligation that each individual has to accept. However, there is certain custom in the Nocte marriage system which is enlisted in every society; beyond that no one can go for marriage as per the will of individual.

*Emily & Lavender* define that “an institution that prototypically transform the status of a man and a woman, carries implication about permitted sexual access gives the offspring a position in society, and establish connections between the kin of the husband and the kin of the wife.”

Earlier, a man choice of wife is limited, for he is almost forced by circumstances to get marry from his own village but it does not mean that a marriage cannot take place with neighbouring village. Besides, a man preferably marries his wife from

nearest relative of his village, considering a less chance to arise any conflict in the family. While the parents of a girl, also usually preferred to get marry their daughter with a man in a village.

In the past, the motive of marriage most substantially was to procure more labour in the economic activities of family. Therefore, early marriage is extensively practiced in the Nocte community. There is no fixed of age for marriage. However, in the contemporary society, an early marriage is still existed but most of the cases are due to ignorance of their relationship among the youths. Child marriage was non-existence among the Noctes since time immemorial.

In the society, exogamy is the general rule for marriage. However, the tribe is endogamous. The term marriage varies from one village to another due to dialectal variation. For instance, the division of Nocte into several groups like, the *Hawa* group, *Hakhun* group, *Dadam* group, *Phong* group, *khapa* group etc. and they termed marriage as *Janchho siat*; *janchho alam*; *zad-a-sang*; *minyu aree*, *namlam*, and *mailet* respectively.

Love marriage is a common form of Marriage among the Nocte. However, it does not take place freely in the village. There is certain custom and code of conduct in each village for marriage, which is abide by every individual. According to custom, marriage do not take place with a girl who belongs to the same clan, as they believe to be descended from the same ancestor, which has a blood relationship. Capture and forcible marriage was not entitled in the Nocte society since time immemorial. In case if it happens then the matter becomes a village issue which is discussed in dormitory in the presence of village council along with chief and accordingly, punishment is given to wrong doer. Therefore, parent's consultation is the most important part of marriage in the society.

*Prasad* quotes that “monogamy is the general rule but polygyny is also allowed. Only chiefs and a few affluent men have more than one wife. The Nocte have custom of preferential cross-cousin marriage. Marriage with mother’s brother’s daughter is regarded as ideal.”

Monogamy is an ideal and popular form of union of the Noctes but polygamy is also not prohibited. According to the custom, there is no restriction for polygamy. A man does keep two wives provided there is no wedlock. However, today people themselves do not generally prefer it because they believe it as an economic burden for the parents and also considered it as an immoral act. In Nocte society, generally people look down a person who marries more than one wife, which they considered them as a man of immoral character. However, chief was an obligation to marry two wives in the early society; one is to become queen and other as subordinate to the former. But today, with the change of mindset even the chiefs of *Borduria* and *Namsang* whom they regard them as paramount chiefs of the Nocte married a single wife.

Betrothal was also an eminent form of marriage to the tribe. When a man admires any girl and vice-versa, is intimated to their parents. Whereby, the parents wait for few days to decide the matter. The family however, after accepting the girl, it is informed to their close relatives. Thereby, they fix the date to visit girl’s parents for seeking their daughter as a bride. The girl’s parents however, are not binding by the proposal made by the bridegroom’s parent. Further, it is purely depended upon the sweet will of the bride’s family whether to accept it or not. Nevertheless, they often accept and welcome the proposal. Thereafter bridegroom’s uncles visit bride’s house with a bottle of *juming* (juice of local wine) and *Sali* (betel nut and leaves) for engagement. This type of engagement is termed as *jaanchho chien* or *katkhatming* in Nocte dialect. Similarly, bride’s parents also gather their relatives to discuss collectively with the bridegroom’s party for proposal of date for marriage ceremony. Accordingly, after interaction to each other, they observe *Rang tam* (pray) pouring drops of wine on the floor seeking for good future of new couples. Henceforth, the couples are socially recognized as wife and husband. In future, either of the couple does not betray each other by any means.

*Saphoa* says, “Levirate marriage is not prohibited, but it is also not compulsory. The consent of the deceased’s brother and the widow is taken into consideration. If the deceased’s brother does not marry the widow, then she is permitted to go back to her parent’s house where she may marry any other person or widower of her choice.”

Levirate is socially sanctioned in the Nocte society however; it is also not compulsive in nature. Such case is very exceptional because the younger brothers of deceased usually do not prefer to. However, there is a custom in the society that if the eldest brother dies at the young age leaving small children. The parents offer first preference to deceased’s younger brother to adopt sister-in-law (widow) as wife. In the society, the acceptance of such case is applauded as a deed of morality. *Denhang* quotes, “In such case the marriage is made known to the villagers by distributing a small piece of meat of pig or fowl called *wohe* in Nocte dialect.” However, in certain villages like *Lazu* and *Tupi*, this culture is not practiced because they believe that keeping of deceased brother’s widow is sin.

*Dutta* mentions, “At *Soha* village, pig along with chicken is also killed and it is kept fixed on a bamboo pole in front of the house to signify inheritance of the widow.” Today according to the perception of the youths, this culture is irrelevant because it may lead to discontent life. Moreover, they treat sister-in-law as mother in the absence of parents in the family. In addition, the youths are now kept girl friend since school days.

*Barua* mentions, “Cross-cousin marriage, that is, marriage with father’s sister’s children or the mother’s brother’s children is permissible. Sororate and levirate are also practiced.”

Sororate is also practiced in the Nocte society but few examples have been seen till date. In the society, when wife die in the immature age leaving children then her sister is given first preference to marry with her brother-in-law, if he agrees to do so with the consultation of parents. In such case, the formality of marriage ceremony is not necessarily done. They just invite close relatives to make them known. However, today it is almost non-practiced owing to the reluctance of the younger generation. In such circumstances, parents also do not force their children to accept this custom. Thus, this form

of marriage, practiced in the early society was almost extinct.

It is worthy to mention that a cross-cousin marriage was also practiced in the early Nocte society. It is however, varies from one village to another. They believe that through this marriage, the age-old relationship that they had since ancestor's time would be preserved. *Changhang* says that in the early society, a boy could marry with a daughter of father's sister. However, marriage does not take place between son and daughter of two brothers. This marriage is termed as '*jongmoan*' (wed locked), which is against the custom of the Nocte. Nevertheless, a boy marries with a daughter of his mother's brother. However, there is no sanctioned to marry between sisters' son and daughter. In the past, it was preferable form of marriage in the society. However, in the present society it is rarely occurred. Today, the young generation selects their own life partner in which the parents can't interfere more but accept. Sometimes son brings his bride without giving pre-information to the parents. In that case, bride's parents are immediately informed and consented and seek their approval. Customarily, there is no barred for marriage in the Nocte society irrespective of any tribes or non-tribal provided there should be no wed-locked in any form especially when marriage takes place within the Nocte society.

A man marriage with two sisters from the same family is strictly restricted according to the custom of the society. However, it does happen among the Nocte society. For instance, in 1970s, a man of *Borduria* village married two sisters from the same family and was permitted to live in the village after observing ritual called '*Rangsatam*' to safe from this sinful act. However, people usually keep distance and looked down to such a person because of his immoral act and character.

Exchange marriage is also popular feature of marriage system in the society. It established more cordial relationship among family members and maintains aged-old relations between two families. In recent time, few families in *Kaimai* village did exchange their daughters and sons for marriage believing that through this custom they further maintain a cordial relationship between the two-families.

Widow re-marriage is permissible in Nocte society. However, it is first approved by her husband family

and relatives. But in certain case, if a widow having a male child is generally not preferred to re-marriage unless she is forced to do so due to unavoidable circumstances. Widow can stay throughout of her life with deceased husband family till she married again even if she doesn't have child.

*Dutta* mentions, "At *Doidam* village, marriage of a widow with another man is possible only if the brothers of the deceased husband agree to it. In such a marriage a chicken is killed and the blood is smeared on a banana leaf by the old men of the village."

In Nocte custom, if a widow remarries with another man then she does not take and claim any property belonging to her deceased husband's family except her own belonging. However, widow remarriage is possible only if the family of the deceased husband agreed to it. In *Kaimai* village, there are few examples of widow remarriage after the approval by the deceased family. Similarly, in case of widower there is also no any social restriction. Even with having children, he has right to remarriage for better future of their children. In certain cases, both widow and widower are not preferred for a new marriage, they live single with his/her children.

#### Marriage ceremonial:

Marriage ceremony is initiated by groom's family however; pre-information is given to bride's parent some days ahead so that they can keep prepared for the day. In Nocte, ceremonial party is arranged by both the family separately at their respective house. They invite their own relatives and villagers for feast party by inviting them the day before evening. This duty is especially given to young girls of their relatives. An invitation is not uniformed for all household. Close relatives of the bride or bridegroom are invited the whole family members whereas some distance relative families are invited select members. In addition to these, there are some selected persons namely *Raamnyu* (oldest women) and *Raamwa* (oldest men) of the village are compulsorily invited. They are invited with special regard because without their presence, the party is unable proceed further. Even if they unable to attain at the party due to some personal reason, s/he share is somehow sent to them at home. In general rule, a person does not ignore invitation in such party except in case of a person has an emergency case or unwell.

In the ceremonial party, some animals are sacrificed for community feast. An affluent family use to cut buffaloes, pig, and chickens and invites all the villagers' irrespective of their relations. Apart from these, they prepare large quantity of rice beer, which are made of local paddy and millet in advance before a week ahead. The community feast is arranged only for launch thereafter all the villagers return to their home except close relatives. Nonetheless, program continues until the morning next day.

In the evening of the marriage party, the young girls of both the clans re-invite the youths of their relatives. The bride's family invites all the *janchho lam* or girls marriageable with bridegroom's clans of the village. Similarly, the bridegroom's family also invites the youths who are *phowa* or boys marriageable with bride's clans. Accordingly young girls and boys are gathered in their respective host house where they have dinner at around 6-7 pm. The bridegroom along with his friends goes to the bride's house lead by one of the paternal uncle called *Hokappho*. While on the other side bride's party curiously awaits for coming of bridegroom party with every things keeps ready. Meantime, all the old men and women leave the bride's house. Evening party is arranged only for the youths to enjoy by entertaining each other with singing, dancing and playing some games. After passing the whole night in the bride's house, they leave along with bride and her friends for bridegroom's house at the dawn of the next morning. They all together have a breakfast there and leave their friends for their own home. Since that day bride joins to her husband's family as a permanent member and is socially recognized as a married woman.

Bride's price:

Bride price is given by some Nocte villages' viz. *Kheti*, *Thingsa*, *Lapnan*, *Hakhun*, *Tupi*, etc. The term is called as *Deephak* in Nocte. In this custom, animal like buffalo, pig, and local rice beer are given to the bride's parents and their relatives as per their demands. It varies from village to village depending on their custom. And in some other Nocte villages, bride-price is not given instead bride's parents give to their daughter all basic necessities like garments, plates, glass, cups, spade, dao, ornaments, etc. as a token of love. This custom is often called as *Henko* in Nocte. This custom is performed on the day of marriage ceremony or some

other day as per convenience of the bride parents. Now a day, the bride's parents perform this custom on the same day of marriage however; it is not compulsive. It depends on the position of one's capacity. In the early society, the interpreters did not understand well the query about the subject by researchers. Therefore, it was a case of information gap due to language barrier and written down by some researchers about the existence of bride price among the Nocte.

Some changes have been taken place in the marriage system after the advent of Christianity in the Nocte society. In some Christian villages, marriage ceremony is performed according to the custom of Christianity. The new couples dressed with black suits by boys and white frock with white hat by girls respectively. The main ceremony is performed in the church. The couples take an oath with reading some scriptures from the Bible lead by the pastor in Baptist and the catechist in Roman Catholic respectively. Rice beer, which is once part of any celebration in the early society, has given up because the Christian are not allowed to take of any intoxicated drinks. In fact, in reality people are not enjoying well without rice bear on any celebration. However, now a day they somehow adapt with the situation. Apart from these, the invitation card system is also recently introduced among the Nocte society. Friends and relatives who are staying outside village are given an invitation card. The invitees accordingly attend at the party with some kinds of presentation for the couples in given time. It shows a drastic change that took place in socio-cultural institution of the Nocte.

In the early society bride's parents used to give some articles to their daughter which are taken to her husband house like metal plates, bowl, jug, clothes, basket, Dao, and knives in the form of token of love. However, in some villages like *Kaimai*, *Borduria*, *Laptang*, *Paniduria*, there is a custom when the bride's parent organizes a party to bid farewell finally to their daughter by giving her some more articles as per their capacity. This is termed as *Henko*. Hawa groups of Nocte generally practice this custom. Articles which include are clothes, local made box (make of wood and tin), umbrella, basket, bowl, plates, and brass jug. In addition to this paternal uncle as well as maternal uncle and the clan members also give some piece of cloth or any other articles to their niece. Today bride receives even modern electronics article like television,

refrigerator, and furniture, necklace made of gold and silver from her parents. Thus, it seems that the mode of marriage in the modern days is more expensive in comparison to the early times. Moreover, among the non-Christian villages, modern wines along with rice-beer are served in the celebration. Apart from these, sacrifice of buffalo becomes a fashion on every occasion even for middle class or affluent family. In fact, due to practice of different custom i.e indigenous as well as modern way creates complicity in maintaining uniformity in the village.

Brief illustrations on Divorce:

*Dutta* mentions, "Divorce is permitted but is not common. In some villages it is not permitted at all. The main causes are mutual dislike, domestic strife and immorality or indolence on the part of the wife."

*Chiakming* (divorce) is not restricted among the Noctes but there are certain formalities, which either of the husband or wife is to perform as per the village custom. It is obtained when both wife and husband agreed to and approved by their parents. Besides, the village council also examines the matter in details whereby they decides whether to divorce or not.

*Dutta* also quotes similar contention, "A divorce can be obtained only after the decision of the village council of the elders, who carefully go into all the aspects and details of the case before giving their verdict." Nevertheless, it is rare case in the society because it involves heavy penalty. Besides, the people usually look down and avoid accompanying with such man or woman. However, sometimes unavoidable circumstances bind them to part each other specially when either of them having illicit relation with third person. A fine is imposed to those who initiate the matter according to custom. However, generally divorce is taken place when husband dislike his wife because of some reasons like, of immoral character of wife, barrens or mental disable. Nonetheless, it does not mean that husband has never committed guilty, but wife somehow digest his guilty and try to pursue him to change his nature. Wife is very cautious to maintain her image in the society because once she lost it; people neglect her in the society.

*Mat* (fine) for divorce is varied from one village to another among the Nocte society. However, it

comprise of domestic animals, plot of land, cloths, local necklace (lit), gong,(jam), local rice beer, and brass jug.

There are three stages of fine for divorce case prevalent in the upper Nocte society. They called as *chhithongni* (12 items). When the couple break up relation after three-four months of their engagement, then fine is imposed which includes one *Arichador* (cloth made of silk locally), one conch and full bamboo tube of rice beer for the village council. In the second stage of fine, it comprises of one pig, one *Arichador*, six conch, one palm leaf garden, one gong, three number of plots of land, five number of full bamboo tubes of rice beer for village council. When the marriage breaks up relation after a long gap of their engagement then fine is almost the same with the second stage. Thirdly when divorce takes place after having one-two children is doubled fines of the second stage.

In *Chasa* village, divorce is obtained when a wife is implicated in adultery. In such case, a fine is imposed on person with whom she is involved. Wife is also divorced husband on the same ground, but wife takes no fines from him. She just leaves her husband and may marry another person of her choice.

*Nokrian* says that in *Kaimai* village, penalty in divorce is taken in terms of *chhithongni*, (twelve items). However, now a day, instead of items it has been converted into cash of Rupees one thousand and one (1001) including some articles like beads, gong, local rice beer, cloths, brass plates, and pig for the villagers present in the meeting.

In fact, divorce is not restricted in the society, of late it appears that marriage is solemnized through love. Moreover, the new generation is well aware of the consequent of divorce. It binds them to avoid divorce in the society. They do not want to go for immoral acts which may defame their image rather they try to make compromise even if it so happens with them. Apart from these, being educated husband and wife they have well informed and understand about its consequences. Above all, the modern judicial court also provides scope for justice in all matters including divorce. Now a day, a person can approach to the magistrate for justice if s/he is not satisfied on the decision taken by the village council.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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