

Consanguinal Marriages in Pakistan: A Tradition or A Cultural Politics and Possible Management Measures?

MARIAGES CONSANGUINITÉ AU PAKISTAN: UNE TRADITION OU UNE POLITIQUE CULTURELLE ET MESURES DE GESTION POSSIBLES?

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Abstract: Marriage, a holy bond between a man and a woman, has been celebrated for the longest time in all cultures and religions. Marriage is an indispensable starting point for family life. Pakistani society has always been a very complicated one, with many different castes and ethnic groups. Marriage pattern and marriage considerations vary from caste to caste but overall, is not the person rather the culture which decides when and whom to marry? Preferably marriages are arranged within the kin group. In Pakistan, cross-cousin and parallel-cousin marriages are both common. According to the recent Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), two-thirds of marriages in Pakistan are consanguineous, but the socio-cultural determinants of such marriages remain largely unexplored. In our culture, parents continue to be the prime decision-makers for marriages of both sons and daughters and individual consent is not given much priority. Consanguineous marriages are preferred among many ethnic groups particularly among sayyed, and Rajputs.....and many others for a variety of socio-cultural reasons. This paper examines the relative importance of consanguineous marital unions with the help of qualitative anthropological data.

Key words: Marriage; Pakistan; religion; Socio-cultural; Cultural Politics

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Résumé: Le mariage, un lien sacré entre un homme et une femme, a toujours été célébrée dans toutes les cultures et les religions. Le mariage est un point de départ indispensable pour la vie familiale. la société pakistanaise a toujours été très compliquée, avec beaucoup de différentes castes et groupes ethniques. Le modèle du mariage et les considérations de mariage varient de caste à caste mais après tout, ce n'est pas la personne mais la culture qui décide quand et avec qui se marier? De préférence, les mariages sont arrangés dans le groupe de parenté. Au Pakistan, les mariages entre cousine croisée et la cousine parallèle sont à la fois commune. Selon les récentes données démographiques du Pakistan et de santé (EDS), les deux tiers des mariages sont consanguins au Pakistan, mais les déterminants socio-culturels de ces mariages restent largement inexplorés. Dans notre culture, les parents continuent d'être les premiers décideurs pour les mariages de deux fils et filles et le consentement individuel n'est pas une priorité. Mariages consanguins sont préférés parmi de nombreux groupes ethniques, en particulier parmi les Sayyed, et Rajputs et beaucoup d'autres pour des raisons de socio-culturelles. Cet article examine l'importance relative des consanguins unions avec l'aide de données qualitatives anthropologique.

Mots clés: Mariage; Le Pakistan; La religion; Socio-culturels; Politique Culturelle

1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage⁴ is not only a holy bond between a man and a woman but it is also essential for the stability of our kinship system. Marriage when perceived as an institution performs various functions. As quoted by Gupta, marriage is a religious performance without which any individual is incomplete. Secondly, marriage implies children who carry the name of the father and assure a happy life for the parents. Besides all, the importance of marriage is vital to satisfy sexual desires of a person in a socially acceptable manner.⁵ The way marriages are arranged is not separable from the culture in which it exists. Pakistani culture encourages collective action over individual action by sustaining cousin marriages as a cultural expression of allegiance. Tradition of consanguinity persuades people to think of the strength and welfare of their *biraderi* first before giving consideration to the individual desire.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Marriage preferences are made within a cultural web and largely determined by social norms but anthropological account for marriage laws and preferences also consider the understanding, conditions, and interest of the people who take part in these arrangements. Scientists consider cousin marriage as one of the important root causes of congenital diseases, but in Pakistan, especially in rural areas, the practice of consanguineous marriages remains constant. Consanguinity⁶ refers to marriage between biologically related cousins⁷. According to Sabeen⁸, it establishes more or less fixed lines that divide people from and connect people to one another. Marriage binds individuals together in a network of in-laws (affine), and it

⁴ Marriage is defined as a contract law fully concluded between a man a woman which are, inter alliance, the formation of a family based on love, co-operation, chastity of the two spouses and preservation of legitimate lineage

⁵ Gupta, 1974:55

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⁶ Consanguineous marriages are divided into two types. One is cross cousin marriage means that a person marries his mother's brother's daughter (MBD) or his father's sister's daughter (FSD). The 2nd type is parallel cousin marriage which means that a person marries mother's sister daughter (MSD) or he marries father's brother's daughter (MBD).

⁷ "Cousins are those people who are descended from siblings and whose relationships are derived from the coordinate activity of the older generation."

⁸ (Sabeen, 1998:16

provides the foundation for charters of inheritance, succession, and identity. This paper locates these cultural roots of cousin marriage in the traditional and structural set up of Pakistani society by demarcating socio-economic factors that influence the choice of marriage arrangers.

Many anthropologists and sociologists have worked on this important issue. Among them is Zakiya Eglar whose efforts provide an outstanding piece of literature on the institution of marriage in Pakistan. Her research findings reveal that marriage within kin group is the most favored form of marriage. In connection with marriage people would say, “*a half from one’s own home is better than the whole from outside.*”⁹ The previous research studies on caste and kinship support the idea that repeated interweaving of kin through marriage offer a fundamental coherence to familiar kindred. . Segalon argues that if the marriage between cousins continues generation after generation, it results in a continuing consolidation of stocks and produces a closer cognatic network. These cognatic networks are close and cohesive and so far are of great importance in the multiplex relations of social life.¹⁰

The practice of cousins’ marriages has been found in many societies. Intiaz Ahmed did his research on this practice among the Muslims of India. According to him, Gujar, Bakerwals of Jammu & Kashmir prefer that the first marriage of their children should take place within their community. Sometimes they bring girls from outside the community which are recognized as genuine but are not widely respected as are the marriage within the community. He explained that marriage between parallel cousins and cross cousins were preferred due to weak economic conditions. Marriage of this kind within the kin group involved limited rights and responsibilities and did not involve major expenditures on dowry, feasts and exchange of articles.¹¹ Similar observations were made by Donnan about marriage in her book, “Marriage among Muslims preference and choice in Northern Pakistan.” Wherein she elaborates the significance of inter-caste marriages. According to her, in many spheres, relationships among the different *qoums* are less restricted and allow people to participate in a number of different activities together. However, there is one sphere in which the *qoums* remain strictly separate from that of marriage.¹² Thus the cousin marriages have a strong socio-economic impact on the family and marriage system in Pakistan. Significant traits of cousin marriage include protection of property, land, and close family ties, along with the belief that interfamilial marriage offers advantages in terms of compatibility of the bride with the husband's family: the bride herself finds it reassuring to marry into a known family¹³.

Besides above mentioned advantages, Cousin Marriages are thought to be more stable and have a low divorce rate. Donnan appraises this fact with the help of a case study from Dhund Abbasies. According to her, the natives explain the preference for a particular spouse in terms of advantages. These advantages include good marital relation between the spouses, kinsmen share similar interests, and sponsored introduction (*safarish*) necessary between parties unrelated to each other is not necessary between kinsmen. Above all each party has prior knowledge of the other, the minimizing the risk of being given false information about potential spouses.”¹⁴

High preference of consanguineous marriages is not just a single manifestation of social fantasy. Rather marriage preferences need to be scrutinized in terms of the whole familial, economic, normative and

⁹ Eglar, 1960:206

¹⁰ Segalen, 1981:307

¹¹ Ahmad, 1976: 95

¹² Donnan, 1988: 57

¹³ (Jaber, Halpern and Shohat 1998:13) Similarly, studies confirm that infant deaths tolls among Swedish (Bittles and Egerbladh 2005), Norwegian and Pakistani children in Oslo and prenatal mortality tolls were similar when deaths were “attributable to monogenic inheritance disorders and congenital malformations were excluded, indicating that these are responsible for greater overall mortality recorded for the Pakistani group” (Bullock and Khalid 1995:211). The studies conducted in the British Pakistani population verify these results. There is a 17 % higher risk of Betathalassaemia in the Pakistani population compared to other ethnic groups in UK. Bittles (2002:95) argues that various types of genetic disorders have been reported to be more common among consanguineous children, such as congenital disorders, including neural tube defects and congenital heart defects: “*Autosomal recessive hearing loss disorders and visual defects such as early-onset retinal dystrophies, primary congenital glaucoma and anophthalmos also are present at increased prevalence*” (Bittles 2002:95).

¹⁴ Donnan, 1988: 183

cultural framework in which they are exercised. In Pakistan most of the castes are endogamous¹⁵ and consanguineous marriages are popular for variety of reasons. To identify these reasons, I not only drew on previous empirical research but also conducted exploratory qualitative interviews during a six-month field visit to Burhan, in Attock district of Hassan Abdal Tehsil with a population of about 8,000. The socio-economic survey was conducted among 80 households only. The ethnic stratification of village revealed the rationale for practicing consanguinity among different castes and *biraderies*.

On the basis of this in depth inquiry, the findings show that caste endogamy is practiced as family tradition in order to preserve the customs and values within a particular caste. Most of the families do not want to recruit any alien to their families who is not familiar with the family norms. Marriage arrangements within families strengthen existing relations. Another intriguing reason for endogamy is the ease of marriage arrangements. People don't need to look outside if there are alliances available in the family. In native's perspective, if all marriages are contracted on open merit basis then the criteria will become really tough which could be met only by the best ones. Individuals who are nice looking, educated, wealthy, with good social profile will be easily picked up and the rest will have thin chance for selection. If everyone is given free choice, they will naturally go for the most excellent. That's why limited choice is granted to the individuals through the law of endogamy. Endogamous marriage pattern ensure that everyone gets a spouse within family.

Another interesting finding in support of cousin marriages was the fact that these are more attuned as the bride-groom and their parents-in-law already know each other since childhood. For *biraderi* members, caste marriage is a sign of family loyalty and commitment to each other which contributes towards steadiness in marriage. Both parties are related to each other so they have fewer conflicts. Thus prior knowledge of the spouse and his or her kin is thought not only to guard one's reputation against deception and promote good relations between the two sides, but it is also thought to add to the possibility of good future relations between the couple themselves

Religion was also found as one of the influential factors particularly among Sayyeds who consider it sinful to marry non-Sayyeds. It was observed that if they don't find a mach for their daughters inside family, they keep them at home. For a boy they may go outside because of the fact that his children will have the same caste as of their father. The rationalization of custom is to maintain their purity of blood. As a matter of fact, great effort is made to maintain genealogies in almost every caste, apart from Sayyeds.

Fieldwork also indicated the underlying fact that somehow people maneuver Islam to meet their own interests. Islam is the religion which recognized women's share in property by granting them inheritance to half of the size of the son's. According to the Islamic teachings, a woman is entitled to obtain her share of inheritance in all types of property of her father. The Quranic verses (4:7, 11-12, 176) elucidate the inheritance rights of women which were usurped by males in the pre-Islamic world. This law often creates problems in an intensive agriculturist, endogamous and patrilocal context. Among land owing families, the implementation of this Islamic law would require a change in their marriage pattern because Islamic law would allow the women of their families to claim their share of land and so a significant amount of land would be dedicated to daughters. Exogamous marriage pattern allow females to marry outside their kin group and these men they are married with will receive small possession of land as inheritance of their wives but a mosaic of small pieces of land scattered about the vicinity would be small compensation for the loss of the large, viable mass of land that the family had controlled. In this situation, parallel cousin marriage provides a good solution. If a girl marries her father's brother's son, then the property she would inherit remains in the possession of her father's family.

This finding is consistent with the tradition among the feudal families of Punjab and Sindh, where girls are married to their parallel cousins who are many years younger or older to them. As a consequence, the parallel cousin marriage turns into a cultural politics and a tactic directed to keep property inside the family and to ensure that the patrimony does not pass into the possession of an outsider. According to journalist Nafisa Shah, women are considered wealth and property of their families. Their worth as commodity is well recognized. The commodification of females has equated them with money. It is not surprising if women

¹⁵ Endogamy is the social rule that requires a person to marry within a culturally defined group of which he is a member.

are bought, sold or purchased. In the tribal society of Sindh and Baluchistan, the girls are usually married with their paternal cousins and this tradition perpetuates control of family on their property or *jagir*. Feudals derive their power from the amount of land they own so they never like to marry their daughters outside family which would disseminate their property into others families and so will lessen their power. Feudal families strictly follow this rule to keep property inside the family. If a compatible partner is not found in the available pool of paternal cousins then daughters are married to spouses who are much younger or older to them but from their own *biraderi*.

3. CONCLUSION

Discussion in this paper indeed reflect the skewed nature of Pakistani culture and strengthen the assumption that, aside from being a tradition, the high rate of consanguinal marriages amongst various *biraderies* may be attributed to the economic gains attached to it under the guise of religion and culture. In Islam marriage is a contract and in deliberating this contract consent of both the man and woman is essential:

“..Place not difficulties in the way of their marrying their husbands if it is agreed between them in kindness.” (Al-Quran, II: 232)

According to Islam, marriage is a union between a man and a woman which venerates individual's consent. Considering it as a bond between two *biraderies* is more cultural than religious. Islam does neither prohibit cousin marriages, nor does it impose or even recommend. We have to distinguish between what is permitted and what is advocated in order to breed positive traits in our culture which are more Islamic and humanitarian.

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