



MARRIAGE INSTITUTION AMONG EDIGA COMMUNITY (A study in Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh)

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Introduction

Marriage is universally regarded as natural and necessary. Only morons and cripples remain single. To the village people the necessity of both marriage and family is self-evident. It is necessary that the family line should be continued. Marriage is regarded as essential among all the castes and social groups in the villages (Dube, 1965; 131-132)¹. According to Manu for Hindus, marriage is a sacrament which includes the observance of many rites. Marriage is a union between a man and woman such that children born to the woman are the recognized legitimate offspring of both parents (Notes and Queries on Anthropology, 1967; 110)².

Among Ediga community marriage is considered as a necessary biological and social institution. From the view point of the Ediga community for a marriage to exist, five criteria are indispensable, presence of socially approved sexual access, sharing of common residence, economic cooperation between the couple, and legitimate begetting of children. (Notes and Queries, 1951)³. Keeping this in view, the present paper aims at discussing the marriage institution among the Ediga community in Rayalaseema region Andhra Pradesh. The region consists of four districts named Anantapur, Chittoor, Kurnool and Kadapa.

A Brief History of Ediga Community

Ediga is one of the socially and economically backward castes in Andhra Pradesh and the Government has included it in the list of backward castes for further development. The Edigas are mainly distributed in Andhra Pradesh, in Ganjam district of Orissa, in Selo), North Arcot and Chengalput districts of Tamilnadu and in almost all districts of Karnataka. The Telugu toddy-drawers whose hereditary occupation is the extraction of juice of the date and palmyra palms, go by different names in different localities (Thurston, 075: 366)⁴. In Rayalaseema districts of Andhra Pradesh such as Kurnool, Kadapa, Anantapur and Chittoor they are known as Ediga; in Coastal districts of Krishna, Guntur, Prakasam and Nacre they are called as Gamallas or Goundlas; in East and West Godavari districts they are known as Settibalijas or Goundlas; in Visakhapatnam they are designated as Yatas; and in Srikakulam district they are known as Yatas and Segidilu.

The Edigas are palm cultivators of the Telugu districts in the north. (Sherring, 1975: 128)⁵. The caste has the monopoly of tapping the different kinds of palm trees and also of selling the fermented juice, and has admirably succeeded in maintaining it (K.V.Reddy, 1989: 171)⁶. It is recorded in the North Arcot Manual that Ediga is one of the toddy-drawing castes of the Telugu community, the name being derived from Telugu 'idchu', to draw. The Edigas are supposed to be a branch of Balijas, separated on account of their occupation (Thurston, 1975; 367)⁷. In the Madras census report, 1901, also it is stated that the Edigas are the descendants of the Balijas from Rajahmandry of Godavari district and their occupation separated them into a distinct caste. The Edigas claim to be descended from Vyasa, the



traditional compiler of the Mahabharata⁸. In a note by F.R. Heirningway, (1915; 57) on the Edigas of the Godavari district, they are said to worship a god 'Kattumai', to whom they annually offer fowls on New Year's day and make daily offerings of a few drops of toddy from the first pot taken from the tree. In this district they are commonly called chettis. Sometimes, they call themselves as sons of the goddess of the pot, sura Bhandeswari⁹.

Marriage among Ediga Community

Among the Edigas, polygamy is common. An additional wife usually attends either to household duties or trade and business. But the common reason for marrying a second wife among the Edigas is the desire to have issues by the second wife, if the first wife is sterile or has any bodily deformity. The first wife will be generally a consenting party, and will continue to live amicably with the co-wife. Among the Edigas polyandry is unknown¹⁰ (Iyyer, 1930: 358-59).

Rules of marriage: The rules of marriage operating at the Ediga caste level are fairly elaborate. People show preference for cross-cousin marriages. A man may marry the daughter of his elder or younger sister. A young man may enter into conjugal relation with the daughter of his paternal aunt, Swagothra, Sapinda marriages are not permitted. Marriages among the people of the same surname (intiperu) are also prohibited. It is incestuous. Inter-caste and inter-religious marriages are prohibited. The Edigas attach much importance to the surnames in making marriage alliances.

Age at Marriage: Child marriages among the Edigas are not practiced. An Ediga girl is expected to marry within a year and half after her attainment of puberty. Recently, the age of marriage is delayed by a number of years on the grounds of education, economy and availability of suitable match. Generally the girls attain maturity between the age of eleven and thirteen years. Among the Edigas normally the marriages take place for males between twenty to twenty five years of age. Girls are married at the age between thirteen and twenty years. It is believed that at the age of twenty a boy becomes eligible to earn for his marriage and to support his family.

Marital distance: Village endogamy is prevalent in all the villages. Most of the Edigas of these villages under study have selected their spouses from within the village. Out of 390 marriages 198 were within the village. If there is a scarcity of eligible women for marriage in the village, then only they go to the neighbouring villages. Generally marriages are contracted nearer the home for the reason mainly to avoid the wasteful expenditure on travelling and all the people in the village have the opportunity to witness the marriage. Further, the personal background of the boy and the girl and their parents is familiar and so the question of fooling each other does not arise. Further they have economical adjustments in times of need.

Bride-price: This practice is an age-old custom, once prevalent in the Indian society among the lower strata of the society. Under this practice the bride-groom's parents offer some cash and commodities fixed by the tradition to the bride's parents in lieu of getting the latter's daughter in marriage to their son. The system is locally called 'oli' and it ranged from rupees five to ten among the Edigas. Now-a-days, this custom once widely prevalent has disappeared not only in Ediga community and also in almost all other communities. With the passage of time bride-price is replaced by dowry among the people of Ediga community.



Dowry: It may be offered as cash or kind or both to the bride-groom's parents by the bride's parents at the time of marriage. This is originally to assist the newly wedded couple in establishing their own new family. Now the amount paid on dowry differs from family to family, depending upon the economical, educational and social status of the prospective bridegroom. Without dowry settlement no marriage contracts are made today. In olden days among the Edigas, the dowry ranges from Rs.1000/- to Rs.10,000/-. Now-a-days it ranges from Rs.50000/- to Rs.5,00,000/-. There are instances where the marriage rituals were stopped in the middle, under the marriage penal, when the agreed amount of dowry was not paid. In accordance to their economic status they offer dowry in cash or articles such as wrist-watch, gold ornaments, television, clothes, motor bike, car etc. It has become difficult to poorer families to marry off their girls.

The most commonly adopted ways of acquiring mates among the Edigas are (i) Negotiation, (ii) Exchange, (iii) Elopement, (iv) Mutual consent and of love and (v) marriage by service. Arranged marriages are most common among the people of Ediga community due to their changed ways of life. Contacts with other neighbouring communities have made them adopt new ways of life, mainly agricultural, and accordingly their marriage practices. The marriages of Ediga people closely resemble those of upper castes such as Kapu (Reddi), Kamma and Kshatriya.

In any orthodox society majority of the marriages are arranged and through negotiations by elderly persons who are the well wishers of both the bridal parties. In case of the Edigas most of the marriages have taken place through negotiation or arranged marriages. Generally, the bride-groom's family first starts the negotiations.

Betrothal: The boy's people, after their return from their trip to the girl's house, think over the proposal and if acceptable, they communicate the same to the latter. Afterwards the boy's party opens a dialogue on the dowry depending upon the qualities and qualifications of the groom, to be paid either in the form of cash or kind or both. The parents of the boy and girl consult a Brahmin astrologer to predict whether the couple will lead a happy married life. When they find favorable they send their willingness to take the girl in marriage. Immediately after that they celebrate the betrothal ceremony, locally called "Vakkaku Marchukovadam" or 'Nischithartham'. At the betrothal ceremony both the bridal parties come to an agreement about the day of the marriage.

The boy's parents on an auspicious day visits the girl's house with flowers, fruits, betal leaves and nuts, turmeric powder, vermilion, a sari and blouse piece (jacket), and a gold chain for the betrothal ceremony. They present all these things to the girl in the presence of her parents, father's sister (menatta), mother's brother (menamama) and the relatives of the boy. After formal bargain the bridegroom's party agrees to take the girl as their daughter-in-law. The payments of dowry vary depending upon their economic position. In olden days the payment of bride-price was practiced and now owing to dominance of males the dowry custom has come.

After the completion of negotiation formalities, the girl is asked to wear the golden chain (naga) and clothes brought by the groom's parents. With this it is publicly announced that the girl is betrothed (nischithartham). After betrothal, both the parties consult an astrologer to fix an auspicious day and time (muhurtham) for the marriage ritual. Under the guidance of the presiding priest, the bridal parties exchange betal leaves (tamboolamulamarpu), nuts by saying, 'I am taking your daughter to my son' to and 'I am giving my daughter to your son'. Then the girl is asked to pick up betalnuts with her cupped hands and keep in her saree. Then the priest with the help of almanac (panchangam) fixes the auspicious day and time (muhurtham) and writes the wedding invitation letter (lagnapatrika).



Since betrothal ceremony is an important rite which concerns socio-economic rights and obligations all the relevant kin, caste and community members are invited to grace the occasion. The invitees are served with delicious vegetarian dishes. Later tumbulam (betel leaves, betel nuts and a plantain) is given to the entire gathering, individually, to mark the completion of the occasion.

Muhurthum ceremony:The marriage ceremony normally takes place in the bride-groom's house among the Edigas. But now-a-days the ceremony often takes place at the bride's house. A normal and arranged marriage ceremony is celebrated in either of the villages, of Narayanapuram or Mddikera as follows. After betrothal ceremony the parents of the bride and groom make preparations for the marriage ceremony. Marriage is an elaborate and time consuming and expensive rite among the Ediga people. So they normally approach the money lenders to raise a loan. Kith and kin are also requested to help them by lending money and services.

The marriage is solemnized before the image of Lord Siva or Rama. The decorated bridal-pair is brought to the marriage pendal and made to sit on low wooden plank seats (pellipeetalu) side by side. The brothers of the groom and the sisters of the bride sit by their side. They are referred to as 'todipellikodukulu' and 'todipelikutullu' respectively. The kith and kin are made to sit on seats according to their age and status under the pendal. The priest conducts the rite by chanting ritual syllables after breaking the coconut and lighting the camphor. A piece of new white cloth is dropped as a curtain in between the groom and bride. The priest asks them to stand up. The groom is asked to place his first toe of his right leg on the toe of the bride's left foot. The priest asks the couple to stand facing each other and the cloth between them is removed. At the appointed time (muhurtham), the bridegroom is asked to tie the marriage badge (mangalasuthra or talibottu) around the bride's neck. While the groom is tying the badge, the local pipe musicians play holy music. The benedictory rice (akshintalu) mixed with wet turmeric powder which is supplied earlier to the assembled men and women will be showered on the young couple.

Before tying of the mangalsuthra the newly married couple are made to take an oath that they should stand by each other through all situations of life, for the mutual satisfaction of bodily, economic and spiritual needs. After tying the sacred necklace, the priest ties the last ends of their upper clothes worn by the couple to symbolize that they are tied to each other. He asks them to pour the holy rice on each other's head. This is locally known as 'talambralu'.

The Edigas perform another important rite known as 'homam' for their gods. To conduct this rite a priest is invited. 'Homam' is arranged by putting mango sticks, paddy husk and ghee in a temporarily arranged fire-pit for the purpose and lighting them with the help of camphor. The couple is asked to sit in front of the homam and holding a burning incense stick. As the arranged material is burning the priest attending the ritual chants the holy syllables or manthras. Later the couple go around the sacred fire seven rounds. This rite in Sanskrit literature is known as 'saptapadi' seven steps. According to the belief they never get separation from each other. After homam ritual the couples are taken out and are made to see the heavenly body 'Arundathi' of the 'great bear' constellation. The couples are given sacred rice to throw towards the star and to invoke them as a model of conjugal excellence. The Brahamudi is later removed by the priest and they lead a long and happy married life. This marks the end of wedding rituals. Now the couple are made to sit under the wedding pendal for 'the viewing of assembly. Kith and kin of the newlyweds give gifts of new cloth, household materials and so on and also shower sacred (akshintalu) rice on them and bless them. All those who have attended the marriage



ceremony are entertained to a vegetarian feast. Eating of the feast marks the completion of the marriage ceremony.

Marriages by number of mates: Out of the total spouses in villages under study 99% of them are monogamous. The 1% consists of serial monogamy and polygamy. Most of the monogamous marriages are the result of arranged marriages. The death of the first wife and elopement are some of the causes for the serial monogamy. Barrenness of the first wife and sexual gratification are the causes for polygamy.

Marriage instability and Divorce: The causes for the instability of marriage among the Edigas are as follows: domestic quarrels and sexual jealousy quarrels that arise between the couple and adultery generally on the part of women. After the separation of the parents, the children remain with the father. This separation will go by a local name “Vogatencukonuta” or “Vidicipettuta” (leaving the husband or wife). Generally wives leave their husbands because they can secure new husbands easily in this community where eligible wives are few in availability.

Divorce has been appropriately called the unhappy opposite of a wedding. The wedding is the legal official beginning of marriage, and weddings are traditionally happy occasions. In contrast, divorce is the legal seal that officially ends a marriage and divorce is always traumatic in some way to every one concerned (Judson T. Landis & Marcy G. Landis, 1956; 323)¹¹.

Conclusion

Many changes have taken place in the institution of marriage which is also an evidence of their socio-cultural potential for adoption. Even though the Edigas have their own rules and regulations such as caste endogamy, sub-caste endogamy, surname exogamy, payment of bride-price all of which govern the choice of mates, they have developed preference for cross-cousin and post-puberty marriages. In addition, now-a-days, some of the well settled Edigas have started performing their marriages in a more or less similar way as that of other agricultural communities characterised by Sanskrit rituals, tying of marriage badge, ‘tali’ and the presence of a Brahmin priest. Further, the payment of dowry to the educated, employed and rich bride-grooms has become customary as in the other agricultural caste of Hindus. They arrange mike-sets with recorded music as well as pipe music during the celebration of marriage.

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