

***Strī-ācār* – An Analytical Study on the Non-Priestly Marriage Rituals of
Bengal**

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Abstract: Marriage rituals of Bengal are quite different from the rest of India. The marriage rituals of Bengali people are divided into two parts: priestly rituals and non-priestly rituals. In this paper the non-priestly rituals of Bengali marriage called *Strī-ācār* are discussed. *Strī-ācār* are performed by married women. This study tries to identify the role of women in Bengali society on the basis of the various wedding rituals practiced by them. An attempt has also been made to identify the environmental, geographical factors behind these rituals that characterizes the distinctiveness of Bengali culture irrespective of ethnicity, caste and religion.

Keywords: Brahmin, Śundi, *eyo*, magical.

Introduction

Marriage is an institution which forms an integral part of a society. Marriage rituals shows the evolution of culture in a particular society. India is a land of diverse culture which vary from region to region. Various ethnic groups reside in this country. The

variation in their cultures are reflected in the various rituals performed by them. India is a country of multi language and religion. Each has their own culture. The society is also divided into a number of castes. It is difficult to deal with the marriage ritual of all the people living in this sub-continent. So I have chosen to deal with the marriage rituals of a particular language group from a particular religion – Bengali Hindus. Prior to 1947, the present state of West Bengal in India and the neighbouring country of Bangladesh together form the land of the Bengali Hindus. After Independence most of the Hindus of the present country of Bangladesh migrated to India and came into West Bengal. Together with them they brought their culture which is very much reflected in their marriage rituals which are quite distinct from the marriage rituals performed by the Bengali Hindus of West Bengal. In this paper I will refer the landmass, which is now Bangladesh as East Bengal, because the people who now perform the rituals of this particular landmass are not citizens of Bangladesh. Though there are distinct differences in marriage rituals of West and East (now Bangladesh) Bengal, there are also variations district wise and caste wise. Bengali marriage rituals can broadly be divided in two categories – the priestly rituals and the non-priestly rituals. The ritualistic differences are not much in priestly rituals and a caste-wise uniformity can be observed in these rituals. But the differences are more in the non-priestly rituals. Most of the rituals are usually done by the married women who are colloquially called *eyo*. The presence of male are minimal in these rituals. Since, they fall on the domain of married women, they are called *Strī-ācār* (*Strī*=married woman, *ācār*=ritual). In this paper I will deal with the non-priestly marriage rituals that are performed in the marriages of Hindu Bengali. *Strī-ācār*, as has been said previously varies from region to region and from one class of people to another. Here I have chosen the marriage rituals of some Brahmin families of Mymensingh and Dhaka region of East Bengal and a Śundi family, who belongs to the brewer caste(the class of people who are involved in making liquor, and are considered lower caste or Śūdra in Bengali society) of Howrah district in West Bengal.

Methodology

This study is mainly based on the information gathered from two books, *Stri-Achar* by Renuka Devi Choudhurani (2006) and *Shuvavivaha* by Mausumi Bandyopadhyay Saha (2017) and also from personal experiences.

Observations

Day Before the Marriage

In Bengali marriages the non-priestly rituals are done by married women in odd numbers, i.e., three, seven, nine and so on. These married women should belong to the same family and must have a happy conjugal life. In Bengali wedding married women are considered auspicious. However, widows are not allowed to perform any rituals and in earlier times they were not allowed to be present near the site of the wedding. In some families of Mymensingh region, two married women (*eyo*) of good conjugal life from the same family are chosen to perform all the rituals connected with marriage. They are called *jorāeyo*. A day before the marriage, these two married women are made to sit facing east, each with a red cloth covering the upper portion of their bodies. These two red clothes are tied together with a knot. A handful of paddy and *durba* grass are kept inside the knot. The whole process is done ceremoniously by ululation and blowing conch shell in the presence of other *eyos* in odd numbers (Choudhurani,2006:28).

I. Preparing Perched Rice and *Anandanāḍu*

The Bengali marriage is not an affair of a single day. It starts a few days before the actual wedding day with rituals like bachelor's meal *āibudobhāṭa* (*āibudō*=bachelor, *bhāṭa*=rice), and in some families of West Bengal, preparing perched rice and sesame ladoos (*ānandanāḍu*). Perched rice and sesame ladoos are prepared by married women ceremoniously a day before the actual wedding. In the Śundi family of West Bengal a room is assigned for performing non-priestly rituals connected with marriage. This room is called the *manigalghar*. The preparation of perched rice is done in this room.

II. *Āibudobhāṭa*

Bachelor's meal or *aībudobhāta* is offered to both the bride and the bridegroom a day before the marriage. Only the female members of the family are present in this ritual (Choudhurani,2006:30;Saha,2017 : 22).

III. Preparation of the *Baraṇḍalā*, *Śrī* and *Aībhāṇḍ*.

There are a few important things required for performing various marriage rituals. These are *Baraṇḍalā*, *Śrī* and *Aībhāṇḍ*. Together with these, *kolsorā* is used by the Śundi families of West Bengal. All the items that are used in the rituals during marriage are kept in the *Baraṇḍalā*. *Baraṇ* means greeting. The *Baraṇḍalā* is family specific. The *Baraṇḍalā* maybe a plate of metal or cane or simply a winnowing fan depending on the family custom. In East Bengal the *Baraṇḍalā* is also called the *caḷonbāṭi*. The *Baraṇḍalā* (Fig.01) is prepared ceremoniously by the eyes of the Mymensingh region (Choudhurani,2006:91). A row of bananas with a dot of vermilion on each banana, and a small pot filled with water are kept in the *Baraṇḍalā*. Five vermilion dots are also given on the pot and mango leaves with vermilion dots are put in it. Five small earthen lamp with wicker and oil are placed at the front side of the *Baraṇḍalā*. Oil and match box are also kept here. Paddy, *durba* grass, vermilion paste, small ginger pieces and small turmeric pieces are kept in small earthen plates in the *Baraṇḍalā* of Brahmin families of East Bengal. In the *Baraṇḍalā* of the Śundi family of Howrah district, leaves of cannabis (*sidhi*), *pañcaśashya* (paddy, barley, sesame, mustard, green moong or green gram) ,five areca nuts, five turmeric, five cowry shells, five *haritakis* (*Terminalia chebula*), five *āmlāś*(Indian gooseberry), five *baheṛāś* (*Terminalia bellirica*), one ceremonial thread or *paiṭe* (worn by the Brahmins), five betel leaves, *durba* grass, dew, ghee, curd, honey, a small coconut, *āmlā* (Indian gooseberry)-*methi*(fenugreek), turmeric paste, sandalwood paste, rice powder paste, vermilion paste, *gerimaṭi* (ochre pieces), *monāmuni* (small seed like thing with filaments) *gela* (*Cesalpinia bonduc*.) fruit, mirror, small knife, red thread, white thread and a reel for thread are kept in small earthen or metallic plates. Along with this a *kolsorā* (a small earthen plate where a small unripe coconut, seven *haritakis*, seven *āmlāś*, seven *baheṛāś* seven turmeric, seven

cowry shells, seven areca nuts, seven pomegranate flowers are kept), a *gachkouṭo*, a *kajallatā* (a vessel used for making collyrium), a nut cracker and a *kunke* or a vessel for measuring rice(containing a small comb, a mirror, a garland, girdle, collyrium and bangles of conch shell and iron) are kept (Saha, 2017:18). *Śrī* is a beautiful small pyramidal structure made up of rice powder paste, turmeric and vermilion and kept in a small plate by pouring mustard oil over it. An alternate of *Śrī* is the *āiyomuchi* or the *nichni-pichni* of the Mymensingh families(Choudhurani,2006:26-27). These are small petal like structures made up of the same ingredients as *Śrī* and kept in two small earthen plates in the *Barandālā*.



Fig.01. *Barandālā* of a Brahmin family of Mymensingh

In the *Śundī* family, four small pots containing rice, one areca nut, turmeric, cowry and a coin in each of them are placed on a winnowing fan (Saha, 2017:18). They are called *Aībhāṅḍ*. They are taken to a Brahmin's house by the *eyos* of *Śundī* family on the morning of the wedding day. The wife of the Brahmin will add some turmeric in the rice of the pots. Then all the pots are taken back to the wedding house (Saha, 2017:26). This ritual is performed to show respect to Brahmin family as they are upper caste. The wife of the Brahmin is given rice, vegetable, ghee and salt in an earthen plate in return. In the Brahmin families this ritual is not required, but *Aībhāṅḍ* are kept in the *Barandālā* of these families. *Aībhāṅḍ* of Brahmin families of East Bengal contain parboiled rice, one piece of

small banana, one areca nut, one betel leaf, few pieces of ginger and turmeric (Choudhurani,2006:91).

IV. Magical and Medicinal Significance: Connection with Fertility

It is interesting to note that all these items even the vermilion dots are mostly five or seven in number. These odd numbers are related to ancient indigenous magical rituals and are considered auspicious in any ritual. It is interesting to note that most of the items used in the Bengali wedding ritual have medicinal values connected with fertility. Areca nut is used in Ayurvedic medicine for treating impotency and female diseases (Bhattacharjee,1980:30-37). *Durbā* grass is used for treating leucorrhoea and other female diseases (Bhattacharjee,1976:98-99). *Baherā* is used in Ayurveda for treating impotency (Bhattacharjee,1977:281). Cannabis leaves are also used for treating impotency, gonorrhoea, female diseases and also for aggravating the process of child birth (Bhattacharjee,1978:279-285).

Symbolic representation of fertility is observed in the use of cowry and betel leaf in Bengali marriage. Cowry, is a symbol of prosperity as it was used earlier in Bengal as a medium of exchange, and also, according to some scholars, its shape represent female organ (Dutta,2002:47). Similarly the shape of the betel leaf also according to some scholars represents the female organ (Dutta,2002:47).

V. *Pāna-khili*

There is one ritual solely done with betel leaf a day before marriage called *Pāna-khili* by the Hindu families of the Mymensingh region of undivided Bengal (Choudhurani, 2006: 95-96). This ritual is done with the two *eyos* or *joṛā eyos* performing the main ritual accompanied by other *eyos* in odd number. Twenty one betel leaves are folded and a small stick is pierced through them (Fig.02). This is an indigenous fertility ritual. The ritual symbolically seals the female organ of the bride for the bridegroom.



Fig.02. *Paña-khili*

VI. Grinding of Paddy and Turmeric

The grinding of paddy and turmeric are again two important rituals that are performed ceremoniously by the Brahmin families of East Bengal (Fig.03). The *jorā eyos* take the lead in these two rituals, accompanied by other *eyos* in odd number (Choudhurani,2006:85-87). Rice is separated from the paddy and a part of it is kept for the *nāndīmukh* ritual. Rice is the staple food of Bengal. Turmeric has antiseptic values and it is applied ceremoniously to both the bride and the bridegroom on the day of the marriage before taking their bath.



Fig.03. Grinding of Paddy and Turmeric

VII. Ganga Invitation

Inviting the river Ganga is another ritual performed by most of the families of East Bengal (present Bangladesh) a day before the marriage (Choudhurani,2006:32). One thing should be noted that the river Ganga does not flow through Bangladesh or East Bengal. The main river of Bangladesh is Padma, which is a distributary of Ganga. But at the same time there are many rivers and water bodies in Bangladesh. The name Ganga may be symbolic as it is considered as the holy river of the Hindu religion. In East Bengal, before partition any local water bodies like river or ponds were selected for this ritual. The two main *eyos* accompanied by other *eyos* in odd number usually go to a nearby water body and nowadays those residing in Kolkata on the banks of river Ganga with the *Barandālā*. Firstly they will greet the water body by the circumambulation of the *Barandālā* and ululation. Then a small design with rice powder paste is made on the bank. A betel leaf with vermilion dots, little bit of oil, sweet and areca nut is placed over the design. A small lamp is lit and floated in the water body and the *eyos* seek the blessings on behalf of the bride and the bridegroom from the river Ganga. After that water is collected and kept in a small pitcher. This water will be used in rituals connected with marriage. The Ganga inviting rituals are simple and they show the reverence given to water bodies in the simple life of the people. As has been mentioned previously that Bangladesh is a land of many rivers, and in rainy seasons most part of it is flooded. So, maybe this ritual is performed to avoid disasters like flood at the time of the wedding.

Wedding Day

Morning Rituals

I. *Dodhimangal*

Early, on the day of the marriage, an *eyo* of the *Śundi* family places the holy pitcher filled with water and mango leaves in the *mangalghar* over a design made of rice powder paste in front of the storage jar containing the perched grain. Conch shells are blown marking the beginning of the wedding. A lamp called *jāḡprodip* is put here and this lamp will

continue to burn till the eighth day of the marriage (Saha, 2017:23). A lamp is lit over a grinding stone by the *eyos* of the Brahmin families of the Dhaka region of Bangladesh, early on the day of the marriage. In most of the families of Bengal, early on the day of the marriage before sunrise, the bride and the bridegroom are fed in their respective houses with a mixture of flattened rice, perched rice, curd and sweets by the *eyos*. This is done ceremoniously and this ritual is called the *dodhimanḡal ritual* (Saha, 2017:42-43). Both the bride and the bridegroom will fast the whole day till the *sampradāna* ritual, and in some families after the completion of all the marriage rituals. This ritual is followed in almost all the houses of Bengal, with exception of some Brahmin families of the Mymensingh region.

After completion of the *dodhimanḡal* ritual, in some Brahmin families of East Bengal, the bridegroom is given a brass mirror and the bride a small spindle shaped wooden object called *gāchkouṭo* (Fig.04) a symbol of prosperity (Saha, 2017:43). The bride and the bridegroom will have to carry this mirror or *gāchkouṭo* in their hands until the whole process of the marriage is completed.



Fig.04. *Gāchkouṭo*

As has been pointed earlier, many of the rituals connected with Bengali marriage are magical in nature. The belief in good omen and protection against bad omen is in the mind of simple Bengali people, a majority of whom are uneducated. So certain objects like metal mirror, collyrium maker, knife, nut-cracker are carried by the bride and the

bridegroom, depending on their respective family customs, during the total period of the wedding ceremony, in order to protect them from evil eyes. In the Mymensingh region of Bangladesh girls carry a metal mirror and knife (Fig.05), and this is given at the time of the *nāndīmukh* ritual (Choudhurani,2006:97).



Fig.05. Bride carrying a Metal Mirror and Knife

In the Śundi family of Howrah district, the bride and the bridegroom are taken separately by the *eyos* of their respective families to a nearby pond after the *haldi* ritual. Water is poured over their head. A collyrium maker in case of bride and a nut cracker in case of the bridegroom are kept in between their feet. Curd, sandalwood paste, turmeric paste, dew, vermilion paste, collyrium, and *āmlā-methi* (fenugreek) are touched on the collyrium maker in case of the bride and nut-cracker in case of the bridegroom. In this ritual a single *eyo* takes water from the water body in a pitcher. The bride or the bridegroom along with this *eyo* are then greeted by the other *eyos* with circumambulation motion of hand with the following things – betel leaf, water, paddy, *durba* grass, banana, *aibhāṅd*, Śrī and *Barāṅḍalā*. After this the collyrium maker is handed to the bride and the nut-cracker to the bridegroom (Saha, 2017:25).

II. *Nidrākalashe jol āṅā*

In the Brahmin families of Dhaka region, there is a ritual called *nidrākalashe jol āṅā* (Saha, 2017:43-44). On the wedding day, before sunrise, a couple with good conjugal life collects

water in a pitcher from a nearby water-body. The husband makes a plus sign with a knife in the water and the wife collects water from that region where the sign is made in the pitcher. This water is kept aside for the *Astamanigalā* ritual.

III. *Sohāg thokāno* and *Sohāg māpā*

Another ritual is done in the Brahmin families of Dhaka region called *sohāg thokāno*, in which again a couple with happy conjugal life is selected (Saha, 2017:44-45). The husband collects soil with a chopper from the four corner of the house and put it in the pallu of his wife's sari. This soil is then kept in the *Barandāla*. A similar ritual is performed in the Brahmin families of Mymensingh region, called *sohāg māpā* or weighing affection (*sohāg*=affection; *māpā*=weighing). The ritual itself shows its indigenous character. In earlier times, the women of Bengal use to wrap a single piece of cloth called sari around their body. In this ritual the inner part of the cloth which is attached to the body is drenched with water and then the water is squeezed out of the inner cloth and collected in a pitcher. In this way water is collected by drenching the cloth of all the married women. A little bit of dust is collected from the place where the married women are standing and are kept in the pitcher. This water is used for bathing the bride and the bridegroom on the second day of the marriage. This ritual is done only in bride's house (Choudhurani,2006:44).

IV. *Sohāg bārā*

After *sohāg māpā*, there is another ritual called *sohāg bārā*, which is common among the Brahmin families of the Mymensingh region in Bangladesh (Choudhurani,2006:45-46). A handful of paddy is kept on a bamboo shoot mat. The bride will first sit on the paddy. Then paddy from her back are collected in a winnowing fan. This process is repeated thrice by putting back the paddy again in the mat from the winnowing fan. After, the bride, the process is continued with other married women till some rice comes out from the paddy. This rice will be kept in the stool where the bride will sit during the ritual of circumambulation around the bridegroom. After the father of the bride gives her hand to

has to take the name of her husband. All the married women including the mother of the bride or the bridegroom apply turmeric paste on the bride or the bridegroom. In the families of East Bengal, water is poured from a small pitcher on the head of the bride or the bridegroom. After that both the bride and the bridegroom break a small earthen plate which is kept inverted with a cowry inside, and both of them say that they are breaking their bachelorship (Choudhurani,2006:99-100). Turmeric has antiseptic value, it is also good for skin. The bride or the bridegroom take their bath in their respective bathroom after this. In the Śundi family of West Bengal, the bride or the bridegroom are bathed ceremoniously by the married women, the process has been described previously. The married women make the bride wear the conch shell bangles, the symbol of married woman. In the *Grhyasūtras* there is mention of washing of the bride, but there is no mention of application of turmeric paste on bride and the bridegroom (Oldenberg,1892 :44, 258-259). However, the *haldi* ritual is very common among the indigenous people residing in Bengal (Kundu,2005:88-99; Sanyal,2002: 107-108). This ritual is also practised by the Bengali Muslims and the Bengali Christians (Saha, 2017:68). So this ritual is very much region specific.

VII. Other Rituals

In the Śundi family of Howrah region, the bride or the bridegroom are made to stand on a grinding stone. Four married women or *eyos* will stand in four corner keeping the bride or the bridegroom in the centre. One of the *eyos* will take the reel of thread from the *barandāla*, and pass the thread to the next *eyo* keeping the reel in her hand, that *eyo* will pass to the next *eyo* and in this way all the *eyos* will pass the thread to the next *eyo* seven times. A rectangle of thread is created by this process which encircles the bride or the bridegroom. Then all the *eyos* will sit. The bride or the bridegroom will now face one of the *eyos*. She will ask that whether the bride or the bridegroom is ending their bachelorship. The answer will be yes. The bride or the bridegroom will cross the thread on that side and will again cross it and come back to their previous position. This process

will be repeated thrice with the other three *eyos*. Then the thread will be tied on the bride or bridegrooms wrist with each *eyo* adding a knot. In most of the families of Bengal, a thread is tied on the wrist of the bride and the bridegroom during the *nāṇḁīmukha* ritual. In some Brahmin families of Mymensingh region, the sacred thread (*paite*) of the bridegroom, which he discards when he gets a new one from the bride's family, is tied on the ankle of the bride. This tying of thread or *paite* is done perhaps to protect the bride and the bridegroom from evil spirit and bad omen.

The bride and the bridegroom of the Śunḁi family are taken to the *maṅgalghar*. The door is closed and *durba* grass and turmeric paste are put on top of the door. After that seven dots of curd, sandalwood paste, turmeric, dew, vermilion, kohl and *āmlā-methi* are put beneath the *durba* grass (Saha, 2017:26). Here the pots of the *aibhāṇḁ* are emptied on a winnowing fan, and the bride or the bridegroom are made to put back all the contents in the *aibhāṇḁ*. This process is repeated thrice and is done only in the Śunḁi families of West Bengal (Saha, 2017:27).

At the same time in the families of East Bengal, the bride measures affection from water kept in a vessel called *dhakon dhokon* with a small earthen plate. While performing this ritual she utters the names of her in-laws, as if she is measuring their affection (Choudhurani, 2006: 46-47). This ritual is also magical in nature. The bride usually moves into her in-law's house after marriage, so by performing this ritual she is trying to make the atmosphere in her in-law's house amicable for her.

So far I have discussed the non-priestly ritual that are performed in the morning on the day of the marriage. There is a priestly ritual called the *nāṇḁīmukha*, performed on the morning of the marriage. This ritual is done to seek the blessings of the ancestors. This ritual is done by the father of the bride or the bridegroom or any senior male member with the assistance of the priest.

Evening Rituals

I. Rituals in the Bridegroom's House

The final wedding usually takes place in the house of the bride. Before the bridegroom leaves his own house, there are certain rituals performed in the Śundi family of West Bengal. The bridegroom is made to stand on a stool and the *eyos* will perform circumambulation around him by sprinkling water and carrying the *barandāḷā* and *Śrī*. The mother of the bridegroom will stand behind him. An *eyo* will throw rice, vermilion, coin, sweet, betel leaf and areca nut over the head of the bridegroom in the pallu of the mother of the bridegroom. This is called *kanakāñjali*. Then the mother of the bridegroom will give sweet to all the married women and bid goodbye to her son and ask him to bring the bride (Saha, 2017:28). There is no such elaborate ritual among the Brahmin families of East Bengal. In these families, the bridegroom seeks the blessings of the elders before leaving his home. The mother of the bridegroom also offers her blessings and will tell her son to bring the bride. In the Brahmin families of Mymensingh region designs of pitcher are drawn on the floor where the bridegroom is being blessed. The pitcher symbolises prosperity and is considered auspicious for someone who is making the journey. The mother of the bridegroom is not supposed to see the bridegroom leaving his home. She reconciles herself in a room and keep her hand in water in a vessel for a peaceful conjugal life of her son (Choudhurani,2006:109-110).

II. Greeting the Bridegroom in the Bride's House

Female rituals are performed when the bridegroom comes in the bride's house. The married women from the Śundi family pour water on the four wheels of the car. Then they throw sugar cakes over the car so that they fall on the other side (Saha, 2017:28). In some Brahmin families of the Mymensingh region, *datura* flower is cut in two pieces, such that each piece looks like a tiny bowl. The pieces are lit like lamp by oil and wicker and are thrown over the car of the bridegroom so that they fall on the other side of the car (Choudhurani,2006:52). This may be a magical ritual, perform to get rid of evil spirits or protecting the bridegroom from the evil spirits. When the bridegroom comes out of

the car, he is greeted in all the families of Bengal with the blowing of conch shell, ululation and by touching the forehead, chest and knee of the bridegroom with the *barandāḷā*.

In Bengali households, the priestly and the non-priestly rituals are performed in two separate areas. The priestly rituals are performed in a covered area, usually on a platform with four banana trees in the four corner, the detailed description of which is found in Renuka Devi Choudhurani's book (2006:48-49). The non-priestly rituals are performed under the open sky in the courtyard of the house. The place is smeared with cow-dung and encircled with four banana trees. This place is usually decorated by the barber. Before, the actual wedding ritual, the father of the bride greets the bridegroom, accompanied by the priest. He gives the bridegroom a new silk two piece attire called *zor*, a sponge-wood cap and a garland. There are also other gifts given to the bridegroom like a watch, a gold ring and bell metal utensils. This gifts are given ceremoniously in the region assigned for priestly rituals. The bridegroom changes his cloth and wear the *zor* given to him. The bridegroom is then taken to the banana tree enclosure of non-priestly rituals. Here he is again greeted by the married women ceremoniously. In the families of West Bengal, the bridegroom is made to stand on a grinding stone, whereas in the families of East Bengal, the bridegroom is made to stand on a small stool. In the families of West Bengal, all the *eyos* in odd numbers will perform circumambulation around the bridegroom by carrying *Śrī*, *aibhāṅd*, *barandāḷā* and by sprinkling water from a water jar. After this one *eyo* will greet the bridegroom with water, paddy, *durba* grass, betel leaf, *aibhāṅd*, *Śrī* and *barandāḷā*, by making all these things touch the knee, chest and forehead of the bridegroom, with circular motion of the hand (Saha, 2017:29). The bridegroom is greeted in the East Bengal families by the *eyos* with water, paddy and *durba* grass. In some families the *eyos* will make circular motion of their hands by the lightened wicker and put the black soot of the wicker on the bridegroom's forehead. The mother of the bride will see the face of the bridegroom with a lamp and then she will wash the bridegroom's hand with milk. Then in some of the families of East Bengal, the *eyos* tease the bridegroom, by

trying to measure his nose, ear, chest with a thread. Sometimes they tie both the hands of the bridegroom and only they release the bridegroom after taking a token amount of money from the bridegroom's family. This money is also called *kanakañjali* (Choudhurani, 2006: 101-102). In the Banerjee family of Dhaka region, the bridegroom is taken near the *nidrākalash*. The mother of the bride ties the bridegroom with the *nidrākalash* by a thread. The bridegroom cuts the thread and comes out (Saha, 2017:49). All these ritual are magical in nature and the purpose is to keep the bridegroom loyal to his wife.

III. Marriage Rituals

After completion of these rituals, the bride is brought in the place of the marriage, sitting on an inverted stool, over the cloth, which her husband has changed with rice underneath it, carried by the male members of her family. Circumambulation of the bridegroom by the bride sitting on the inverted tool is done with the help of male members. During the circumambulation, the brides of West Bengal cover their faces with betel leaf, while the faces of East Bengal brides are uncovered. In East Bengal, the bridegroom's face is covered with a cloth. After circumambulation is done seven times the covers are removed, the bride and the bridegroom both see each other and exchange their garlands three times. Then they are taken to the platform of priestly rituals, where *sampradāna* is done with priestly mantras. The *sampradāna* ritual is performed by the priest of the bride's family. After this all the priestly rituals are done by the priest of the bridegroom's family, since the bride has been given away, she now belongs to her husband's family. But one thing is interesting that the non-priestly rituals are however, continued to be performed by the female members of the bride's family till she leaves her parental house. In the families of West Bengal, the main priestly rituals in presence of fire like *kuśandīkā*, *saptapadī*, *lājhoma* take place on the same day. However, in the families of East Bengal, these rituals are performed on the following day. But, the rituals like *saptapadī* and *kuśandīkā* are not performed in the Śundī family, since they belong to the Śūdra caste and so they are barred from uttering Vedic mantras. The *saptapadī* and the *kuśandīkā* are done in presence of fire with Vedic mantras. The Śundī couple perform a ritual called *khoi*

porāṇo, where perched rice or *khoi* is given thrice on the fire prepared with stalks of jute plant, by the bride and the bridegroom. Before, this ritual, the bridegroom puts *sindur* or vermilion along the parting line of the bride's hair with a rice measuring vessel called *kunke* (Saha, 2017:29-30). After this, no female ritual or *śtrī-ācār* is performed on that day in the Śundī family of Howrah region.

IV. Post *Sampradaña* Rituals

In East Bengal families after the *sampradaña*, the bride and the bridegroom are taken in a room and they are seated on a bamboo shoot mat. Then bridegroom is offered rice pudding prepared by the mother of the bride. The bridegroom makes a mark on the rice pudding with his ring, then he smells it and throws it away. After this, the bride and bridegroom play cowry under the supervision of the *eyos* (Fig.06). Twenty one cowry shells and bridegroom's ring are required for this game. The couple individually takes all the twenty one cowry shells and the ring in their hands respectively and throw it back into the mat. The maximum number of inverted cowry shells decides the winner (Choudhurani,2006:102). The inverted cowry resembles female organ. So again this game is connected with fertility. Cowry is also used as a medium of exchange during early medieval and medieval times. So this game is also related to prosperity. The game of cowry is also a part of the marriage rituals of some of the indigenous people of Bengal like the Rajbansis (Sanyal,2002:111-112).



Fig.06. The Cowry Game

This game is followed by the *dhakon dhokon* game. Water is kept in a vessel the mouth of which is covered by an earthen plate, a small towel is placed beneath this earthen plate. This plate is called *dhakon dhokon*. The bride will take this plate and keep it in the floor without making noise, and then the bridegroom will keep the plate in its proper place without making noise. If a sound is made while keeping the plate then there will be quarrel among the couple as is presumed. The bridegroom is made to promise touching the lid that he will always praise his wife. The Bengali bride usually wears a crown made of sponge-wood and the Bengali bridegroom wears a cap made of sponge-wood. A small piece of sponge-wood is tore from both the crown and the cap and made to float in the water of the vessel. The two pieces of sponge-wood would touch each other indicating a happy conjugal life. After this the couple breaks their fast with sweets and then they have their dinner (Choudhurani,2006:103-104).

Second Day of the Marriage

Bride's House

a) West Bengal

Early morning, the following day, the married couple of West Bengal starts their journey for the bridegroom's house. In the Śundi family of Howrah district, the bride puts her hand in a vessel filled with milk and *alta* and then puts her hand in the chests of her father, brothers and uncles. The mother of the bride will stand behind the bride and the bride throws rice, vermilion, coin, betel leaf and areca nut on her pallu, a ritual which symbolises her paying back to her parent the price which has been spent on her upbringing (Saha, 2017:30).

b) East Bengal

In East Bengal, however elaborate rituals are made on the second day of the marriage. In the Brahmin families of the Dhaka region, after getting up on the next morning the bridegroom puts *sindur* or vermilion along the parting line of the bride's hair while they are in the bed (Saha, 2017:50-51). In the Brahmin families of Mymensingh region, the

couple are greeted by the *eyos* in the bed with *barandāla*. The couple is allowed to leave the bed after paying a token amount of money to the sister and sister-in-laws of the bride by the bridegroom or his family members. The couple then seats on a bamboo shoot mat. The barber cuts the nails of both of them. During the process, the *eyos* hang a cloth over their heads. Rice is put on the cloth which the *eyos* sauté with their hands holding the cloth over the head of the bride and the bridegroom. The washer-man throws soap over their heads. Then the bridegroom draws two dolls on the back of the bride with salt, and then scrapes the salt with a shell. The lunch for the bridegroom will be prepared with this salt. Similarly the bride draws two dolls with *sindur* (vermilion) on the back of the bridegroom and then scrape it with a shell. This vermilion will be given in the partition of the hair of the bride. The couple is then taken to an open space in the courtyard. The bridegroom is made to sit on a stool and the bride on a grinding stone. There are four small banana trees in the four corners surrounding them. These banana trees are intertwined with a thread with mango leaves hanging from it. An artificial pond is created within this enclosure. The couple is smeared with turmeric paste by the *eyos* within this enclosure. The mother of the bride puts the *monāmuni* paste, which was grinded on the day of the marriage, in the chest and back of the bridegroom with seven betel leaves, seven times and throws it away. Five *eyos* then bathe the couple with five pitchers of water and also with the *sohāg* water (Choudhurani,2006:55-56,104-105). These rituals are performed so that the newlywed couple enjoys a happy conjugal life. These ritual are also connected with fertility, the structure of *monāmuni* and the way the *sohāg* water is collected proves this.

After the bath, the couple wears the same cloth, which they wore during the *sampradāna* ritual. An offering is made to the Sun God by the couple in presence of the Brahmin priest (Choudhurani,2006:56). The Brahmin priest will then retreat to the artificial platform for the final ritual of *kuśandīkā*. In the meantime another ritual is performed by the *eyos*, where the Brahmin priest has no role.

Fourteen betel leaves are kept surrounding the artificial pond which was discussed previously. Each betel leaf has a *sindur* (vermilion) dot, one piece of ginger, one piece of turmeric, one banana, one areca nut and one cowry on it. The circumambulation of the artificial pond is done by the couple, both keeping their fingers intertwined, accompanied by the *eyos*, who will sprinkle water. The bride carries a towel. The circumambulation is done fourteen times, and each time the bridegroom picks up one of the fourteen betel leaves with a knife, put the *sindur* along the parting line of the bride's hair with his ring (Fig.07) and give the betel leaf to the bride, who will keep it in the towel. After completing the circumambulation of the pond, the bride sits on the grinding stone and the bridegroom on a stool in front of the pond. Then the game of cowry is performed by throwing the cowry shells along with the bridegroom's ring five or seven times by both of them in the pond. After that all the cowry shells and the ring are collected and are put in the open palm of the bride, the bridegroom touches the bride's hand and both promises that they will hide each other's fault. The bridegroom then jumps over the pond carrying the bride (Choudhurani,2006:56-57). This ritual is again performed on the eighth day of the marriage nowadays, and in earlier times when the bride, after puberty returns to her in-law's house. Child marriage was common in earlier times, when a girl was usually married before she attained her puberty age. She lived in her father's house till she attains her puberty.



Fig.07. Bridegroom puts the *Sindur* or Vermilion

After this pond ritual, the bride and the bridegroom are taken to the main area of the marriage, where the Brahmin priest is waiting for them to perform the *kuśandīkā*, the ritual of circumambulation of the fire and the *saptapadī* or taking the seven steps. After this the bride and the bridegroom are taken inside the house where they are offered sweets and juice. They are seated on a bamboo shoot mat where the cowry game and the ritual of *dhākon dhokon* is repeated (Choudhurani,2006:57-58).

The journey to the bridegroom's house begin in the evening in the families of East Bengal. The ritual of paying parent's debt by the bride is also done in these families. A small fish, curd, pitcher with water, gold and silver are kept in a corner, which the couple sees before making their journey. These are considered auspicious for journey (Choudhurani, 2006: 58).

Greetings in the Bridegroom's House

In the *Grihyasūtras* there are mention of a number of rituals to be performed when a bride enters her in-law's house, but in Bengal, most of these rituals are not followed. The bride enters her in-law's house in the morning in West Bengal and in the evening in East Bengal. In the Śundī family, the *eyos* throw sweet cakes over the car so that it will fall on the other side when the car comes near the bridegroom's house (Saha, 2017:31). The bride is taken inside the bridegroom's house by walking over a cloth. In the families of the Mymensingh region, miniature earthen plate is kept upside down under the cloth which the bride breaks with her heel (Choudhurani,2006:64). In the Śundī family of West Bengal, both the bride and the bridegroom are made to walk over the cloth. The bride carries a measuring vessel with paddy on her head and the bridegroom sprinkles paddy from that vessel with a nut cracker, while walking behind the bride. In most of the families the bride carries a pitcher on her waist and a lata fish in her hand (Saha, 2017:32). In some families, the bride stands on a plate of milk and *alta* and then walks inside the house marking her red foot-prints on a white cloth. The brides in the Bengal family are greeted with *barandāla*

by the *eyos*. In the families of East Bengal, both the bride and the bridegroom sit on the lap of the bridegroom's mother. The bridegroom's mother gives the bride an iron bangle, which is another sign of married women. The bride is made to watch overflowing milk while boiling, a sign of prosperity. She is also taken to the grain store room to see the prosperity of her in-law's (Choudhurani,2006:63-64). According to the *Grihyasūtra*, when the bride enters her in-law's house, the married Brahmin women take her inside the house and put a male child on her lap (Oldenberg,1892 :50). In some Bengali families also, a male child is made to sit on the bride's lap, so that she gives birth to male children. The couple sleeps separately on the first night in bridegroom's house and this night is called *kaḷrātrī*.

Third Day of the Marriage

On the next day the bridegroom gives a plate full of food and a new sari ceremoniously to the bride and promises to take the responsibility of feeding his wife in the presence of his family. The bride serves her husband's family rice which in a way symbolises her inclusion in the family clan of her husband. She eats, after this, the food which has been given to her by her husband. A small boy is placed on her lap, while she eats her first meal in her husband's house. In the Śundi family, the thread that was tied earlier on the wrist of the couple is untwined. In the evening a reception is arranged, where the bride is formally introduced to the bridegroom's clan. In the night, the couple sleeps together.

Aṣṭamanigala

The newlywed couple visit the bride's house on the fourth or on the eighth day of the marriage, depending on the family tradition, and stays there for one night. On the eighth day of the marriage a ritual called *aṣṭamanigala* is performed in some families of East Bengal. This ritual is a repetition of the pond ritual which was performed on the second day of the marriage, and with this the non-priestly rituals come to an end. The thread or *paitē* that was tied on the wrist of the bride and the bridegroom, and in some cases on the ankle of the bride is untwined. The knot on the clothes that were used by the *joṛā eyo* is

also untwined (Choudhurani,2006:67-70). The other things that are used for rituals like the things in *barandāla* are kept for one year in some families. But most of the families throw them in the river Ganga after the *aṣṭamanigala* ritual.

Analysis

The priestly rituals or the Vedic marriage rituals that are followed in many parts of India are mainly derived from the *Grihyasūtra*. Bengal came under the influence of Vedic culture much later. The earliest text of Vedic culture, the *Ṛig Veda*, belongs to 1500 BCE to 1000BCE and at that time the Vedic culture was limited on the western part of the subcontinent. The transmission of Vedic culture into the northern part and middle Gangetic plain took place through many centuries. The eastern migration of the Indo-European people can be traced in the story of Videgha Maṭhava in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. Even in this tale, the land east of Videha is considered impure as it is not touched by Agni or is not under Vedic culture (Chakravarti,2010:54). Surely, Bengal was considered an impure land as it was on the east of Videha in the time of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. Bengal was included in the north Indian political map during the time of the Mauryas in third century BCE, as is proved by the Mahāsthān inscription (Krishnan,1989:104-105). As Bengal remain on the fringes of Vedic culture, the penetration of this culture is slow and gradual in this society, and thus Bengal retains many of its indigenous culture. The priestly ritual that is followed in this region is mainly derived from *Udvaha Tattva* by Raghunandan, a writing of the sixteenth century. The priestly rituals, starting from the *nāṇḍīmukha*, are religiously observed in almost all the families of Bengal. There is not much variation in the priestly rituals, except the mantras which vary from family to family depending on the Veda, which they follow. But there are much variations in its parallel non-priestly rituals or *Strī-ācār*, from region to region or from family to family depending on caste as has been discussed above. The above discussions also show that they are much more elaborate and continued for several days compared to the priestly rituals.

There are two important rituals that is very much attached to Bengali psychology and are considered an integral part of Bengali marriage : the exchange of garland by both the bride and the bridegroom and the application of vermilion or *sindur* on the partition of hair of the bride by the bridegroom. Both these rituals are non-priestly rituals and there is no specific mantra for these rituals. Both these rituals are region specific. The exchange of garland not between bride and bridegroom, but between bridegroom and bride's brother is practised among the indigenous tribes like the Lodhas of Bengal (Kundu, 2005: 90). The mark of *sindur* or vermilion in the partition of hair is the symbol of married woman in Bengal irrespective of caste and region. The indigenous people residing in Bengal also consider this as a symbol of married life (Kundu,2005:88-99; Sanyal,2002: 112). It has been already discussed that this ritual of application of vermilion in the hair partition is done under the supervision of the married women or *eyos*. Besides vermilion in hair partition, conch shell bangles, coral bangle (nowadays plastic red bangles are used instead of coral), and iron bangle are the symbols of married women. One married woman makes the bride wear the conch shell bangles and coral bangles, while her mother-in-law makes her wear the iron bangle. All these symbols are put on the bride ceremoniously directly or indirectly by married women. There is no role of priest in this. These symbols are local to this region and differ from the rest of India. Iron bangle is also considered as a symbol of marriage by certain indigenous group residing in Bengal. In the Lodha custom, the bridegroom makes the bride wear an iron bangle (Kundu,2005:90). Similarly the application of turmeric paste on both the bride and the bridegroom is also a ritual that is followed in West Bengal, irrespective of caste, religion and ethnicity. The application of turmeric and vermilion are attributed to the pre-Aryan culture according to some scholars (Das, 1953:2).

Two separate areas are assigned for performing the priestly and the non-priestly rituals. Most of the priestly rituals like the *kuśandīkā*, *saptapadī*, *laṅghoma*, *śilārohan*, are done in the presence of fire. Fire is considered auspicious in Vedic rituals. But in the non-priestly

rituals of Bengal, water has an important role in all the rituals instead of fire, like the invitation of Ganga, collecting water ceremoniously from local water-body, collecting *sohāḡ jol*, ritual of *sohāḡ māpā*, floating of sponge-wood from the cap of the bridegroom and the crown of the bride, circumambulation of the artificial pond, playing cowry in the pond and jumping over the pond by the bridegroom carrying the bride. Water is considered as a purifying agent in Hinduism. The undivided Bengal is a land of rivers. The southern part of this landmass has the world's largest delta. So plenty of water-bodies, marshy land and wetlands are common features of this region. Bengal is rich in agriculture because of its fertile land. Bengal was also well-known for its participation in maritime activities from the early historic period. The Gange port, identified with the archaeological site of Chandraketugarh, is mentioned in both *Periplus* and Ptolemy's *Geography* (Chakravarti,2010:204). Another important ancient port, Tāmralipta (modern Tamluk in West Bengal) was also mentioned by both Pliny and Ptolemy. In the early medieval period, a port referred as Samundar by Arab travellers and Sudkawan by Ibn Battuta had become very important in the maritime activities (Chakravarti,2010:333). This port is located near Chittagong of present Bangladesh. Both agriculture and maritime activities have one thing in common, that is water. Thus water forms an important aspect of sustenance in Bengal, and thus its importance is acknowledged in the simple ritualistic life of the Bengali people. In colloquial Bengali, water is called '*jīban*' or life.

There is also a clear difference of attitude in the priestly ritual and the non-priestly ritual towards the bride and the bridegroom. The priestly rituals are mainly andocentric. In the priestly ritual, we find the utterance of the mantra, mainly by the male members like the father of the bride and the bridegroom. These mantras are in Sanskrit, and in most cases the persons who are uttering these have no knowledge of the language, and thus they are unaware of their significances. These rituals are a reflection of the patriarchal society, where the father of the bride has to touch the feet of the bridegroom before offering him his daughter. According to Sukumari Bhattacharjee (2010: 23-25), these rituals somewhat

undermine the position of the bride. In the *sampradāna* ritual, she is treated like an object to be given away (Bhattacharjee, 2010: 24). The bridegroom utters mantra to purify the body of the bride in front of the fire (Bhattacharjee, 2010: 23). The mantras uttered by the bridegroom while the bride stands on the stone is to make her still as stone so that she remain unaffected by family trouble in her in-law's house. However, the non-priestly rituals are performed in colloquial language and the couple participate actively in them. Thus they are treated as equals in these rituals. In early days polygamy was prevalent in Bengal. The non-priestly rituals are mainly magical in nature and are performed to keep the bridegroom affectionate to his wife.

Conclusion

The female rituals are a reflection of the indigenous customs of the different regions of undivided Bengal. One interesting thing is the involvement of marginalized communities in these marriage rituals, like the barber and the washer-man, both belonging to the lower castes. The dominance of women folk, especially married women is an interesting thing. Though male members like barber, washer-man, and sometimes bride's father or brother are seen participating in these rituals. But their role is that of a performer. They perform these rituals under the supervision of married women, who are the initiators. It should be remembered in this context that Indian society is patriarchal in nature, where women are barred from uttering mantras or performing any religious ritual, which are performed strictly by the males. Till, the nineteenth century women were not allowed to get education and they lived a somewhat secluded life. This attitude towards women is very much reflected in the priestly rituals connected with marriage. The above discussions show that the priestly ritual is not a part of Bengali culture, because these are performed in separate areas and sometimes outside the house. The language used is Sanskrit and not colloquial. Whereas, *śtrī- ācār* are performed in colloquial language. So there may be a possibility that the whole marriage rituals are performed by married women in earlier Bengal with local customs and the priestly rituals are later incorporated into the system

when Bengal came under the influence of Vedic culture. Marriage was done to increase the progeny, so most of the rituals connected with this are related to fertility. The customs are simple and the botanical objects involved in the rituals have medicinal values connected with female diseases and fertility. Their inclusion in marriage rituals make them sacred. Thus their preservation becomes a necessity for the community. The simple female rituals are perhaps the oldest marriage rituals of Bengal, performed in close proximity with environment strictly by married women.

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Dr. Rupa Chakraborty, Assistant Professor, Department of Botany, Dinabandhu Andrews College, Kolkata, for helping me with the scientific names of some of the botanical ingredients discussed in this work.

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