



# Customary Marriages in Assam: A Study of the Intergenerational Perspective of the Tribal Communities

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## Abstract

Customary marriage practices are integral to the cultural identity and social cohesion of Assam's indigenous communities, such as the Bodos, Mishings, and Karbis. These practices symbolize spiritual continuity, communal solidarity, and heritage. However, the accelerated pace of modernization has introduced profound transformations, leading to generational divergences in their perception and practice. While elder generations emphasize the sanctity and elaborate nature of traditional rituals, younger generations often advocate for simplified, pragmatic approaches influenced by modern education, urbanization, and shifting economic realities. This study explores how these evolving perspectives reflect broader socio-cultural transitions. Elders, traditionally key decision-makers in matrimonial matters, view customary marriages as anchors of cultural identity, while the youth assert greater autonomy, often challenging hierarchical and gendered roles embedded in these practices. External factors such as globalization, legal reforms, urban migration, and exposure to diverse ideologies further complicate this generational divide, raising questions about cultural erosion versus adaptation. The research highlights emerging hybrid models of marriage practices that selectively integrate traditional rituals with modern values like gender equality and cost-efficiency. These adaptations underscore the resilience of customary marriages as dynamic institutions that evolve with societal changes. By examining intergenerational negotiations and the external influences shaping these practices, the study situates Assamese tribal marriages within broader discussions on identity, cultural preservation, and modernization. It calls for policy measures and community-driven initiatives to balance tradition and modern aspirations, ensuring these practices remain relevant and meaningful in contemporary society.

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## Introduction

A customary marriage refers to a form of marital union that is rooted in the traditions, rituals, and cultural practices of a particular community or group, rather than solely governed by formal codified laws or civil registries. These marriages are typically characterized by adherence to long-standing social norms, local rituals, and specific customs that may include bride price, dowries, clan affiliations, and religious ceremonies. Customary marriages can differ significantly depending on the cultural context, with their practices being heavily influenced by family, clan, and community traditions.

An Assamese marriage refers specifically to the traditional marriage practices and customs observed among the various ethnic and tribal groups in Assam, a northeastern state of India. Assam is a culturally diverse region with multiple indigenous communities, including the Bodos,

Mishings, Karbis, Tiwas, Rabhas, Deoris, and others. These groups each have distinct marriage traditions that incorporate specific rituals, beliefs, and family customs that reflect their respective socio-cultural identities.

Assamese marriages are deeply rooted in both Hindu and tribal customs, with many of these traditions influenced by centuries of socio-religious syncretism, migration, and modernization. For instance, Assamese tribal groups may incorporate dowries, clan-based alliances, and local spiritual rituals into their marriages. Common ceremonies include traditional prayer offerings, ancestral rituals, and festivals like Bihu, which emphasize community participation, prosperity, and familial harmony.

The background of customary marriage practices forms a cornerstone of the cultural identity of tribal communities in Assam, such as the Bodos, Mishings, Karbis, and Rabhas. These practices,



deeply rooted in the social and spiritual traditions of these tribes, serve as vehicles for preserving their heritage, ensuring communal cohesion, and transferring cultural values across generations. Historically, customary marriages have been central to tribal life, reflecting the distinct ethos of each community.

In recent decades, modernization, encompassing urbanization, education, economic shifts, and exposure to globalized values, has introduced significant changes to these practices. Younger generations, influenced by modern education and media, often challenge traditional norms, resulting in a growing divide between them and the elders, who view these practices as sacred and immutable. This evolving dynamic necessitates an in-depth study to understand the intergenerational perspectives on customary marriages and how these perspectives reflect broader social transformations within Assamese tribal communities.

In post-independence India, the legal landscape added further complexity. The Constitution recognises the cultural rights of Scheduled Tribes (Constitution of India, 1950), yet national laws such as the Special Marriage Act (1954) (The Special Marriage Act, 1954), and Hindu Marriage Act (1955) (The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955), promoted uniformity and reform, especially in relation to women's rights (The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005). This coexistence of statutory and customary systems created tensions between community autonomy and constitutional principles of equality, consent, and non-discrimination. For tribal communities, marriage remains a contested space where cultural rights, identity, and legal norms intersect.

The significance of studying customary marriages in Assamese tribal communities lies in their ongoing transformation under the pressures of modernization. Globalisation, migration, education, and economic change have altered how marriages are arranged and celebrated. Elders often regard rituals as essential to preserving identity, while younger generations increasingly favour simplified, pragmatic approaches. The rise of mass media and exposure to urban lifestyles have further shaped expectations, sometimes eroding communal practices in favour of individual choice.

This research is driven by three core questions: What are the defining features of customary marriages among Assamese tribal communities? How have historical, legal, and social forces

shaped their evolution? And how do different generations negotiate between tradition and modernity in contemporary Assam? By engaging these questions, the study contributes to understanding how indigenous communities adapt their cultural practices while safeguarding their identity.

This paper argues that customary marriage in Assamese tribal societies is not static but dynamic, continuously shaped by historical encounters, legal frameworks, and social change. Modern influences have led to simplification and hybridisation of rituals, but these shifts also reflect communities' resilience and capacity to adapt. The study of these evolving practices offers broader insights into cultural continuity, legal pluralism, and the ways in which indigenous traditions survive in the modern era.

## Review of Literature

The literature on customary marriage practices in Assam is rich and diverse, with various scholars focusing on the intersection of tradition, culture, and modernization. Studies on Assamese tribal marriage customs highlight how these practices serve as cultural markers and expressions of community solidarity. Ethnographic studies of tribes such as the Bodos, Mishings, and Karbis reveal the intricate rituals involved in marriage, which often include traditional dowries, clan exchanges, and ceremonies that invoke ancestral spirits and local deities.

A significant portion of the literature also discusses the impact of modernization on these customs. Scholars such as Ravi Kumar (Kumar, 2020), *Marriage as a Social Function in Bodo Communities* 56 (2020) and Nandita Roy (Roy, 2017), *Marriage Practices Amongst the Mishing Tribe of Assam* 213 (2017), have noted that the younger generation's exposure to urban lifestyles, education, and mass media has led to shifts in how marriage is perceived. While older generations emphasize the sanctity and cultural significance of traditional ceremonies, younger individuals often prioritize pragmatism, viewing elaborate rituals as outdated or unnecessary. This generational shift reflects broader socio-cultural changes, including the decline of communalism and the rise of individualism in rural and tribal contexts.

Author Pradip Kumar (P. Kumar, 2021), in his work, *Tradition vs. Modernity: A Study of Tribal Marriage in Assam*, explores how external factors like legal reforms, government policies, and economic changes influence marriage practices. These external forces often challenge traditional



systems, leading to either adaptation or resistance from indigenous communities. Some studies also address the role of women in these communities, with scholars like Sanjay Mishra, (Mishra, S. 2016) has discussed in his research, *Marriage Practices and Social Change among Indigenous Tribes of Assam*, (2016), examining how women's roles in marriage ceremonies are evolving in response to gender equality movements.

Furthermore, literature on intergenerational relations within indigenous communities offers valuable insights into how tribal members negotiate their cultural heritage in the face of changing social and economic landscapes. These studies suggest that while conflict may arise between generations, there is also an emerging recognition of the need to adapt certain traditions to ensure their survival in the modern world.

### Gaps in Existing Research

While there is significant literature on marriage practices in Assamese tribal communities, several gaps remain that this research aims to address:

1. **Limited Focus on Intergenerational Perspectives:** Much of the existing literature tends to focus either on the traditional aspects of marriage or on the influence of modernization, but rarely do studies specifically examine the generational divide in detail. This research seeks to fill that gap by focusing on the differing perspectives of older and younger generations within Assamese tribal communities.
2. **Underexplored Impact of Urbanization and Migration:** While there is acknowledgment of the influence of urbanization, there is limited research on how migration and the shift from rural to urban environments have specifically impacted marriage practices within tribal groups. This study will examine how these migration patterns contribute to the changing dynamics of marriage.
3. **Lack of Focus on Hybrid Practices:** Few studies explore the emergence of hybrid practices that combine elements of traditional rituals with modern values. This research aims to investigate how tribal communities in Assam are adapting their marriage practices through a fusion of old and new, offering a more nuanced understanding of cultural adaptation.
4. **Absence of Media Influence Analysis:** The role of media, particularly social media and local films, in shaping perceptions of

customary marriages has not been extensively studied. This study aims to incorporate an analysis of how media influences the younger generation's view on marriage, highlighting its potential role in altering or preserving traditional practices.

### Legal Framework

Customary marriages among Assamese tribal communities, such as the Bodos, Mishings, and Karbis, operate within a complex legal landscape that both recognizes and regulates marriage practices. While these marriages are traditionally governed by tribal customs, national and state laws increasingly influence their conduct and legitimacy.

The Special Marriage Act, 1954, provides legal recognition for marriages conducted outside personal laws, including inter-caste and inter-community unions. Tribal communities in Assam have begun registering marriages under this Act to ensure legal validity, particularly concerning inheritance, property rights, and women's protection. Similarly, the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 governs tribes following Hindu customs, regulating consent, minimum age, and registration, sometimes necessitating adaptations to traditional practices.

Legislation aimed at protecting vulnerable groups, such as the (Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006), has influenced customary practices that historically allowed early marriages, prompting communities to modify rituals to comply with statutory age limits. The (Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005) further empowers women to assert their rights, indirectly shaping marital negotiations and decision-making processes within tribes.

State-level policies in Assam provide additional support for tribal marriages (Government of Assam. (n.d.). *Assam Tribal Welfare Policies and Marriage Assistance Schemes*), including financial assistance and incentives for legal registration. These policies encourage communities to formalize marriages while retaining core cultural rituals, balancing statutory compliance with tradition.

Judicial recognition of tribal customary marriages has reinforced the validity of these practices when they adhere to essential community norms such as consent, age, and ceremonial observances. Collectively, these legal frameworks influence the evolution of Assamese tribal marriages, prompting selective adaptations that maintain



cultural identity while ensuring alignment with national laws.

### **Factors Contributing to the Transformation of Customary Marriages in Assam**

The transformation of customary marriage practices among Assamese tribal communities, particularly the Bodos, Mishings, and Karbis, has been influenced by factors deeply rooted in the region's socio-cultural and economic landscape. Unlike in other regions, these changes reflect Assam's unique blend of indigenous traditions, migration patterns, and state policies affecting tribal identity.

Modern education in Assam has played a critical role in reshaping marriage practices. Schools and colleges in tribal areas have exposed young people to broader societal values while retaining a focus on local culture. This has encouraged questioning of traditional practices such as arranged marriages, excessive ritual expenditure, and dowries, while fostering gender equality (Kumar, R. 2020). For example, Bodo and Mishing women increasingly assert their autonomy in marital decisions (Kumar, R. 2020), reflecting both global awareness and the region's gradual push toward women's empowerment. Intergenerational differences are particularly stark, with younger, educated generations adopting progressive attitudes, while elders often prefer maintaining traditional customs (Baruah, M. 2018).

Urbanization and migration have also uniquely affected Assamese tribal marriages. Tribal populations frequently migrate from rural districts to cities like Guwahati for education, employment, or government work. This migration has led to simplified wedding rituals due to logistical constraints and weakened the influence of the community elders who traditionally oversaw marriages. Additionally, inter-community and inter-ethnic marriages have emerged as urban youth interact with other communities in Assam and beyond, creating hybrid marital practices that blend traditional rituals with urban lifestyles (Dutta, P. 2019).

Technology and social media have further transformed marriage norms in Assam. Online platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram have introduced Assamese youth to national and global ideas of marriage, including love marriages and online marriage services (Social Media and Marriage Practices in Assam, 2021). Access to information has encouraged questioning of traditional practices like elaborate ceremonies and clan-based partner selection.

Social media also facilitates intergenerational discussions, allowing young people to negotiate changes within their families while retaining a connection to Assamese cultural identity (Kalita, R. 2021).

Legal reforms and policy frameworks in Assam have had specific effects on tribal marriages. The formal recognition of customary marriages under the Special Marriage Act interacts with local practices, influencing rituals, dowry expectations, and women's rights. State policies aimed at protecting tribal rights such as land ownership, inheritance, and female empowerment schemes (Government of Assam, 2018), have directly affected marriage decisions, often creating tension between national law and customary traditions (Bora, R. 2021). For instance, Mishing and Karbi communities have adapted certain marital practices to align with legal regulations, while still preserving core cultural elements.

Economic changes in Assam have further contributed to the transformation of marriage customs. The shift from agrarian livelihoods to government employment, tea plantation work, and urban occupations has increased economic independence, particularly among women (Phukan, T. 2019). This has led to simpler weddings, reduced dowry burdens, and a focus on marriages as personal and economic partnerships rather than solely social obligations. High living costs in urban areas and the mobility of tribal youth have also prompted communities to reassess the necessity of elaborate rituals, balancing tradition with practical considerations (Nath, J. 2017).

In conclusion, the transformation of customary marriages among Assamese tribal communities reflects a unique interplay of local education, migration patterns, technology, legal reforms, and economic changes. While the core cultural values of identity, community, and heritage continue to shape marriage practices, these factors have fostered adaptation, negotiation, and selective modernization, resulting in a distinct evolution of marital norms in Assam.

### **Evolving Customary Marriages: Perspectives Across Generations**

This chapter examines how customary marriage practices among Assamese tribal communities, particularly the Bodos, Mishings, and Karbis, are perceived, maintained, and transformed across generations. Drawing on tribal narratives, oral histories, and comparative cultural studies, it highlights the dynamic interplay between



preserving heritage and adapting to contemporary realities.

**Elders' Perspectives:** Elders consider marriage rituals sacred, emphasizing their spiritual, social, and cultural significance. They view ceremonies as vital for communal identity and cohesion, with extended family and clan participation reinforcing social bonds. Elders often perceive modernization, urbanization, and legal reforms as threats that may erode traditional values and rituals.

**Younger Generation Perspectives:** In contrast, the youth value autonomy in marital choices and prefer flexible, simplified practices. Influenced by education, urban lifestyles, and global ideas, younger members challenge rigid customs, dowry practices, and elaborate ceremonies, seeking approaches that balance cultural respect with practicality.

**Comparative Tribal Practices:** The Bodos maintain spiritual and communal rituals but simplify dowry and logistics. Mishings combine traditional rituals with modern conveniences, while Karbis navigate urban migration and inter-community marriages by adapting city practices while retaining rural traditions (Boro, K. 2020).

**Conflict and Resolution:** Intergenerational tensions emerge around ritual complexity, gender roles, and the communal versus individual nature of marriage. Compromise is achieved by selectively preserving core rituals, renegotiating family roles, and balancing symbolic value with economic and logistical realities.

**Lessons from Adaptation:** Assamese tribal communities demonstrate selective preservation of key rituals, collaborative intergenerational dialogue, and cultural innovation. These adaptive strategies illustrate how customary marriages can remain relevant and resilient, reflecting both heritage and contemporary social needs (UNESCO, 2018).

### Conclusion and Suggestions

The transformation of customary marriage practices among Assamese tribal communities, especially the Bodos, Mishings, and Karbis, reflects a delicate balance between tradition and modernity. While these marriages continue to be central to tribal identity, forces such as education, urbanization, technology, legal reforms, and economic changes have reshaped rituals, decision-making processes, and gender dynamics. To preserve these practices while allowing

adaptation, several targeted measures are necessary.

Legal recognition of customary marriages is critical. Establishing a formal registry for tribal marriages that respects traditional rituals while aligning with national laws will safeguard the legal rights of communities and ensure that their practices are culturally validated. Such recognition can also prevent disputes and provide clarity in cases of inheritance, consent, or inter-community unions.

Cultural education is another essential step. Integrating knowledge of tribal marriage customs into schools and colleges in Assam can help younger generations understand the historical significance of these practices. Education should also explore how these customs have evolved, encouraging a balanced perspective that embraces both heritage and modern values.

Communities themselves should take an active role in documenting their traditions. Oral histories, video recordings, and digital archives created by tribal members can preserve rituals and ceremonies for future generations. This ensures that valuable cultural knowledge is not lost amidst modernization and migration.

Facilitating intergenerational dialogue is equally important. Workshops, cultural events, and forums where elders and youth discuss marriage practices can help negotiate changes in ways that respect both tradition and contemporary needs. Local leaders and cultural mediators can guide these discussions, resolving conflicts and fostering understanding.

Hybrid practices that blend tradition with modernity should be encouraged. Adjustments to rituals that incorporate gender equality, simplify ceremonies, or adapt to urban lifestyles allow marriages to remain culturally relevant while addressing practical challenges. Such flexibility helps younger generations feel connected to their heritage without undue burden.

Economic support can also play a vital role. Providing financial assistance or low-interest loans to families for customary weddings can alleviate the high cost of traditional ceremonies, making it feasible to continue practicing cultural rituals while reducing economic stress.

Modern technology offers another avenue for cultural preservation. Training tribal communities to use social media, digital archives, and virtual platforms can help record and share marriage



traditions, increase visibility, and instill pride in cultural identity. These tools also allow global recognition of Assamese tribal practices.

Cultural festivals and ritual celebrations can provide practical and engaging ways to maintain traditions. Annual events where different tribes showcase marriage customs allow younger generations to experience their heritage firsthand and reinforce the social relevance of these practices.

Supporting research and documentation is essential for long-term preservation. Grants for anthropologists, ethnographers, and local communities can generate detailed studies of tribal marriage practices, highlighting their cultural significance and evolution. Such research informs both policy and community efforts,

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