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Marriage an alien notion for Indian tribe



Live-in relationships are the norm in Garasia community where women retain a high status in western state of Rajasthan.

Udaipur, India – Live-in relationships between couples who see little reason to marry may be a modern fashion in India’s Bollywood film industry, but for one community in India they reflect thousands of years of tradition.

Members of the indigenous Garasia tribe in the northwestern state of Rajasthan have been cohabiting in live-in relationships outside wedlock since time immemorial.

Social scientists studying the arrangement – called *dapa* and recognised through formal rituals – point to a low incidence of rape and dowry deaths in these communities where women retain a high status.

“These tribals, whose livelihood depends on farming and working as labour, marry their live-in partners only when they have sufficient money,” said Shahid Pathan, a journalist who has gained an understanding of indigenous customs in the Kotra area.

“Needless to say, that happens much later in their lives, and in absence of money they continue living together for several years and even become parents without the fear of bearing a child out of wedlock.”

Joint wedding

It was surprising for many visitors to the wedding of 70-year-old tribal Naniya Garasia to his 60-year-old live-in partner Kaali to discover that not only were his grandchildren present but also his three sons – Mugla, 50, Gana, 40, and Shankar, 35.

Surprise turned to astonishment when they learned that the sons were also marrying their live-in partners – Lakhmi, Masri and Hazari respectively – on the same day.

All four men had been living with their partners for years and their children had all been born out of wedlock, something much of Indian society is yet to accept.



Naniya Garasia with his three sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren.
[Shahnawaz Akhtar/ Al Jazeera]

Naniya’s second son, Gana, and his partner did not think twice before having four children, nor did Gana’s younger brother Shankar, who has three kids.

Live-in relationships of this kind are at the heart of the culture of this tribal group concentrated in the region around Udaipur and Kotra.

The Garasia tribe in Rajasthan and parts of Gujarat holds a fair for their teenage children to befriend partners of their choice – and they then elope with them before returning and living together without having to marry.

When the eloped couple return, the boy's family has to pay a sum to the bride's family before the couple starts to live together outside wedlock.

But therein lies a catch: if they wish, women can seek a new live-in partner at another fair, who is then expected to pay a higher price to the woman's former partner. A similar practice can be found among the Gamars, another Rajasthani tribe.

Unlike the rest of India, women in the Garasia community hold a superior position to men - placing the onus on the man to bear all the expenses for the wedding.

In the marriage of Naniya and his sons, for example, the rituals were performed at the house of the groom whose family had to shoulder all the expenses.

Lesson in democracy

Nonetheless, this ancient custom may be slowly changing.

"The only change that has been made to the age old practice of dapa is that now the verbal agreements between the boy and the girl are being recorded on paper," said the head of Kotra, Gowri Devi.

Despite this concession to modern life, tribal people have little idea about similar live-in relationships among the middle classes of India's large cities and other countries.

"We had no idea that other people also live in this way but it is in our culture and we have been doing it for thousands of years," said Nirmal Singh Garasia, the head of Jodiwad village.

Social scientists who have studied the custom such as Rajiv Gupta believe that the tribal culture of cohabitation is based on a system known as "the right to choose and right to reject".

"They do not find the modern society's marriage system worthy, as it brings with it several impositions, especially on women," said Gupta.

"In tribal society, democracy is deep rooted, whereas the institution of marriage gives superiority to manhood.

“Tribal people are more into practices that give equality to both sides – what democracy actually preaches to us.”

The social scientist also revealed that some tribal people practise a custom called *chaadar dalna*, marrying their brother’s widow.

Indeed a community considered by so many Indians as backward may even be able to teach mainstream society a few lessons about gender relations – cases of violence against women such as rape and dowry deaths are rare among the Garasia.

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