

Marriage among the Paniya of Wayanad: Traditions, Transformations, and Cultural Continuities

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INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a fundamental institution in human societies, serving as a cornerstone of social organization and cultural continuity. Among the tribal communities of India, marriage holds a distinctive place, shaped by deep-rooted traditions, customs, and community norms. Unlike the mainstream Indian society, where religious doctrines predominantly govern matrimonial practices, tribal marriages are primarily regulated by indigenous customs, emphasizing kinship ties, social cohesion, and economic cooperation. Marriage is not merely a personal or family affair among tribal groups but a collective social institution that strengthens community bonds and ensures the survival of cultural identity.

Wayanad, a district in Kerala, is particularly notable for its high concentration of tribal communities, including the Paniya, Kattunaika, Kurichiya, Kuruma, and Adiya tribes. These communities have distinct social structures, economic systems, and cultural practices, which are reflected in their marriage customs. Traditional wedding ceremonies among these tribes often incorporate symbolic rituals, music, dance, and community feasting, reinforcing their deep connection to nature and spirituality. Each aspect of the marriage process, from the selection of a partner to post-marriage responsibilities, is guided by long-standing customs that have been passed down through generations. Many of these traditions include unique practices such as bride price, marriage by service, and matrilineal or patrilineal residence, all of which have significant cultural implications.

Marriage in the Paniya community is not just a personal commitment but a deeply cultural and communal event that reflects the values, traditions, and social fabric of the tribe. Elders play a central role in matchmaking, ensuring that unions align with ancestral customs, family reputation, and social harmony. The marriage process is rich with symbolic rituals, from the initial negotiations to the elaborate wedding ceremonies that involve traditional songs, dances, and feasts. These customs serve to strengthen family bonds, reinforce cultural heritage, and celebrate the collective identity of the community.

Statement of the problem

The Paniya tribe, occupies a paradoxical position in contemporary India: it is simultaneously embedded within one of the nation's most ecologically sensitive and culturally rich highland zones and subjected to systemic socio-economic marginalization that threatens its very cultural continuity. Despite residing in a region celebrated for its biodiversity and tourism-driven economic growth, the Paniya community remains among the most deprived populations in South India, characterized by widespread landlessness, low literacy rates, absence of formal leadership structures, and chronic indebtedness (M & Thomas, 2021)(Yoganandham, 2023). This structural vulnerability has rendered their traditional institutions—including marriage—not merely static cultural artifacts but dynamic sites of contestation, where deeply rooted customs collide with the imperatives of modern legal frameworks, educational advancement, market integration, and shifting generational values. The institution of marriage, historically functioning as the central axis of Paniya social organization, kinship regulation, and cultural transmission, is now undergoing profound and multifaceted transformations that are neither linear nor unidirectional. While foundational ethnographic accounts document a system governed by the authoritative mediation of elders (Mooppans), elaborate multi-day rituals involving Vattakali dance, traditional song cycles, and communal feasting, and a complex calculus of lineage compatibility and horoscope alignment, contemporary fieldwork reveals a landscape of increasing fragmentation and adaptation (M &

Thomas, 2021). The introduction of national legislation, particularly the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, directly challenges customary practices surrounding age of consent and marriageable age, creating a zone of legal ambiguity and potential conflict between community autonomy and state sovereignty (Yoganandham, 2023). Concurrently, the gradual expansion of formal schooling and access to wage labor is fostering new aspirations among youth, who increasingly articulate desires for personal agency in partner selection, challenging the absolute authority of elders and redefining the meaning of compatibility beyond caste and lineage to include shared educational attainment and vocational goals. This intergenerational negotiation is further complicated by the tribe's precarious economic reality; while traditional bride price or service-based marriages once functioned as mechanisms for resource redistribution and alliance formation, they are now often perceived through the lens of exploitative debt bondage or financial burden, prompting families to seek alternative, less costly arrangements. Furthermore, the erosion of the ecological base upon which Paniya subsistence and cosmology are built—through deforestation, commercial plantation expansion, and climate-induced agricultural stress—undermines the material foundations of rituals that are intrinsically tied to specific flora, fauna, and seasonal cycles. The problem, therefore, is not simply one of “tradition versus modernity” but of a complex, multi-scalar crisis of institutional viability. It is the urgent and unresolved tension between the imperative to preserve a unique cultural heritage encoded in marital practice and the equally pressing need for socio-economic mobility and legal protection, a tension that risks dissolving the very social fabric—the collective decision-making, the intergenerational knowledge transfer, the symbolic reinforcement of identity—that has sustained the Paniya community for centuries. Without a nuanced understanding of how these transformations are negotiated on the ground, interventions risk either perpetuating harmful marginalization under the guise of cultural preservation or accelerating cultural dissolution in the name of progress. Consequently, the central problem this research addresses is the systematic erosion of the Paniya marriage system as a coherent, self-regulating social institution, driven by intersecting pressures of legal standardization, economic precarity, educational aspiration, and ecological disruption, and the consequent threat this poses to the long-term cultural resilience and social cohesion of the community.

Research Objectives

1. To document the traditional marriage customs of the Paniya community in Wayanad.
2. To understand the cultural significance of rituals and the role of community elders in the marriage process.
3. To analyze how socio-economic changes have influenced and transformed these marital practices.
4. To assess the implications of these transformations on cultural identity and social cohesion.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine marriage traditions and their transformations within the Paniya community of Wayanad. Fieldwork was conducted over a three-month period across several Paniya settlements, enabling sustained engagement and immersion in the community's social and cultural contexts.

Data were gathered through multiple qualitative methods. In-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse group of participants, including community elders, married couples, youth, and local leaders. Participant observation took place during marriage ceremonies and related communal events, allowing the researcher to directly observe rituals, practices, and social interactions. Focus group discussions were organized separately with women and younger community members to explore intergenerational perspectives on marriage and cultural change. Archival research further supported the fieldwork through the review of tribal welfare reports, previous ethnographic studies, and relevant local administrative records.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals with direct knowledge and experience of marriage customs. The study included:

- 8 community elders (including Mooppans)
- 10 married couples representing two generations

- 6 unmarried youth
- 4 women participants in focus group discussions
- 2 local tribal welfare officials

A total of 30 participants took part in the study.

Data Collection Methods

- In-depth semi-structured interviews
- Participant observation during two wedding ceremonies
- Focus group discussions (conducted separately with women and youth)
- Archival review of tribal welfare records and ethnographic literature

Analytical Framework

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were manually coded to identify recurring themes such as elder authority, economic negotiation, ritual symbolism, modernization, and youth agency. The findings were interpreted through anthropological theories of kinship and alliance, particularly structural-functional perspectives and alliance theory as articulated by Lévi-Strauss, along with contemporary discussions on legal pluralism and cultural change.

Ethical clearance was obtained prior to the study, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The institution of marriage among tribal communities in India has been widely examined through anthropological, sociological, and historical lenses. Foundational works such as *The History of Human Marriage* by Edward Westermarck and *Primitive Society* by Robert H. Lowie laid the groundwork for understanding marriage as a universal social institution shaped by cultural variation. Westermarck (1921) emphasized the evolutionary and moral foundations of marriage, while Lowie (1920) challenged simplistic evolutionary models, highlighting the complexity of kinship and marital forms across societies. These early theoretical contributions provide a comparative framework for examining tribal marriage systems such as that of the Paniya.

Structural and functional interpretations of marriage are further elaborated in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, where A. R. Radcliffe-Brown conceptualizes marriage as a mechanism that sustains social equilibrium and reinforces kinship structures. Similarly, Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* theorizes marriage as a system of alliance and exchange between groups rather than merely a union between individuals. His alliance theory is particularly relevant to tribal arranged marriages, where negotiations, gift exchange, and lineage considerations structure marital alliances. Forter Meyer's *Marriage in Tribal Societies* (1962) further underscores how marriage rituals serve integrative functions within small-scale societies, reinforcing solidarity and continuity.

The matriarchal thesis proposed by Robert Briffault in *The Mothers* offers an alternative theoretical perspective by foregrounding women's centrality in early social organization. Although widely debated, Briffault's argument invites reflection on gender roles and inheritance patterns in tribal societies. In the Indian context, D. N. Majumdar's *The Affairs of a Tribe* (1950) and S. C. Roy's ethnographic study *The Oraons of Chotanagpur* (2004 edition) provide detailed analyses of tribal social dynamics, kinship, and customary laws governing marriage. These works establish that tribal marriage is deeply embedded in social organization, economic cooperation, and ritual practice.

Ethnographic accounts of South Indian tribes are particularly significant for understanding the Paniya community. Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* documents the customs and social hierarchies of various tribal groups, including those in the Malabar region. Similarly, A. A. D. Luiz in *Tribes of Kerala* (1957) and P. R. G. Mathur's early documentation of tribal situations in Kerala provide insights into indigenous institutions, rituals, and kinship systems. C. Gopalan Nair's *Wayanad, the People and*

Its Traditions (1911) offers historical observations on the socio-cultural life of communities in Wayanad, a region closely associated with the Paniyas.

More focused discussions on the Paniya tribe are found in P. Somasekharan Nair's *Paniyan* (1976) and his earlier work on customs and rituals related to marriage (1970), which describe traditional wedding practices, ritual symbolism, and the authority of elders such as the Mooppan. Nettoor P. Damodaran's *Aadivasikalude Keralam* (1964) situates Kerala's tribal communities within broader socio-historical transformations. Contemporary analyses such as *The Fabric of Paniya Tribe* and Pradeep K. S.'s edited volume *Rhythm of Tribe* (2017) explore the persistence and adaptation of tribal social institutions, including marriage, in modern contexts.

The transformation of tribal marriage under modernization and state intervention has been critically examined by K. S. Singh in *The Scheduled Tribes* and later in his discussion on tribal marriage customs and changes (2016). Virginius Xaxa in *Tribes of India: Struggle for Survival* and his 2014 article on changing patterns of tribal marriage highlights how integration into mainstream society, education, and economic mobility reshape indigenous marital practices. These studies argue that while traditional institutions persist symbolically, they increasingly adapt to dominant cultural norms.

Specific attention to cross-cultural and legal dimensions of marriage is seen in the 2016 Banaras Hindu University study on cross-cultural marriages in India, which contextualizes arranged marriages within broader sociological debates on family and modernity. Rajasree and Kalesh (2019), in their study of Paniya marriages and the POCSO Act, 2012, examine tensions between customary practices and modern legal frameworks, demonstrating how tribal marriage systems intersect with state law. Similarly, Mutharayappa (1996) analyzes structural and marriage patterns among tribals in Karnataka, offering regional parallels relevant to the Paniya community.

Educational and socio-economic transformations are also reflected in studies such as B. Suresh Lal's (2005) historical account of the Banjara community, which illustrates how economic and health factors influence marital decisions. Nair, Nassar, and Srinivasan (2023) examine cultural rituals of Janajatis in the Nilgiris, highlighting continuity and change in ceremonial practices. Together, these works reinforce the idea that tribal marriage is neither static nor isolated but dynamically shaped by policy, modernization, and social mobility.

Overall, the literature indicates that tribal marriage systems, including that of the Paniya, function as mechanisms of alliance formation, cultural preservation, and socio-economic regulation. Classical anthropological theories (Westermarck, Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss) provide the conceptual scaffolding, while Indian ethnographic and contemporary sociological studies ground the discussion in empirical realities. The convergence of tradition and transformation emerges as a central theme: marriage remains a vital cultural institution, yet it continually adapts to educational advancement, legal reform, economic change, and integration into mainstream society.

Data Analysis

In the past, marriage in the Paniya community was heavily influenced by the participation of elders and continuity of customs. The involvement of elders was seen as crucial in ensuring that marriage adhered to traditional values and customs. Caste and economic considerations play a significant role in marriage decisions. The cultural aspects of the Paniya community are deeply rooted in traditional beliefs and practices, which are reflected in their marriage rituals. The Paniya community's marriage practices encompassed a rich tapestry of elaborate rituals and ceremonies that went far beyond the simple union of two individuals, instead symbolizing the joining of entire families and their respective lineages. These intricate ceremonies were deeply rooted in cultural traditions passed down through generations, serving as a vital means of preserving and celebrating the community's unique heritage.

The marriage rituals often spanned several days, with each phase carrying its own significance and symbolism. Traditional songs, passed down orally from elders to the younger generation, were an integral part of these ceremonies. These songs often recounted the community's history, myths, and values, effectively serving as a

form of cultural education for all participants. Similarly, traditional dances like Vattakali and Kambalakkali played a crucial role, with specific choreographies and movements symbolizing various aspects of married life, fertility, and prosperity.

Feasts were another central element of Paniya wedding celebrations, bringing together not just the immediate families of the bride and groom, but often the entire community. These communal meals featured local delicacies and dishes with cultural significance, reinforcing social bonds and fostering a sense of unity among community members. The preparation and sharing of food during these events were seen as acts of collective participation and blessing for the newlyweds.

Community Involvement in Weddings:

The concept of arranged marriages was deeply ingrained in the Paniya community's social fabric. Parents and elders took on the responsibility of finding suitable matches for their children, viewing this as a sacred duty to ensure the continuation of family lines and the preservation of community values. The matchmaking process was a complex affair, taking into account various factors that extended beyond the individuals directly involved in the marriage.

Family reputation played a crucial role in this process, with lineages known for their integrity, wisdom, or contributions to the community being highly sought after. Social status, while important, was often considered in conjunction with other factors to ensure a harmonious match. The compatibility of horoscopes was another significant consideration, reflecting the community's belief in celestial influences on human relationships and destinies.

Moreover, the arranged marriage system often involved extensive negotiations between families, covering aspects such as dowry, future living arrangements, and expectations for the couple's roles within their extended families. These discussions were seen as essential for establishing a strong foundation for the marriage and preventing potential conflicts in the future.

It's worth noting that while arranged marriages were the norm, the degree of involvement of the prospective bride and groom in the decision-making process could vary. In some cases, young people were given the opportunity to express their preferences or concerns, albeit within the framework of parental guidance and community expectations.

These marriage practices, with their emphasis on family involvement, cultural continuity, and community participation, reflected the Paniya community's collective approach to life events. They served not only to unite couples but also to strengthen the social fabric of the entire community, ensuring the preservation and transmission of cultural values across generations.

The Paniya community's approach to marriage was a multifaceted and deeply ingrained cultural practice that extended far beyond the immediate families involved. This comprehensive system incorporated input from various stakeholders, including village elders and community leaders, who played a pivotal role in shaping marital unions. These respected figures were not merely passive observers but active participants in the matchmaking process, bringing their wealth of life experiences and wisdom to bear on crucial decisions.

The involvement of community elders served multiple purposes. Firstly, they acted as mediators, facilitating discussions between families and helping to navigate potential conflicts or disagreements. Their respected status within the community lent weight to their opinions and advice, often smoothing over differences and fostering consensus. Secondly, these elders served as guardians of cultural traditions, ensuring that proposed marriages aligned with the community's broader social and cultural objectives. This alignment was crucial for maintaining the cohesion and continuity of Paniya society.

The collective decision-making process inherent in this approach to marriage further reinforced the interconnectedness of individuals within the Paniya community. It emphasized the idea that a marriage was not just a union between two individuals but a joining of families and, by extension, a strengthening of community

bonds. This interconnectedness was a fundamental aspect of Paniya social structure, contributing to the stability and resilience of their society.

Interestingly, the arranged marriage system within the Paniya community was not as rigid as it might initially appear. It often included a period of courtship or familiarization between the prospective couple. This phase was designed to allow the potential partners to develop a sense of compatibility and mutual understanding before the wedding. While still guided by family and community expectations, this practice introduced an element of personal choice and agency into the process.

The courtship period served several important functions. It provided an opportunity for the couple to assess their compatibility on a personal level, beyond the social and economic considerations that might have initially brought them together. This time also allowed them to begin building the foundations of their relationship, fostering communication and understanding that would be crucial in their married life. Additionally, it helped to ease the transition from single life to married life, allowing the couple to adjust to the idea of a shared future.

This balance between traditional values and the personal aspirations of the younger generation was a key factor in the success of the Paniya marriage system. By acknowledging the importance of personal compatibility while still respecting the wisdom of elders and the needs of the community, the Paniya were able to create a system that contributed to the longevity and stability of marriages within their society.

The Paniya approach to marriage also reflected their broader social values and economic realities. Marriages were often seen as strategic alliances that could strengthen social ties, consolidate resources, or even resolve conflicts between families or groups. This pragmatic approach did not necessarily preclude romantic love but recognized that successful marriages required more than just emotional compatibility.

Furthermore, the marriage customs of the Paniya community were deeply intertwined with their spiritual beliefs and cultural practices. Wedding ceremonies often incorporated traditional rituals and symbolism that reinforced the couple's connection not just to each other, but to their ancestors and the natural world. These ceremonies served as important rites of passage, marking the transition of young adults into full members of the community with new responsibilities and roles.

In traditional Paniya tribal marriages, elders play an instrumental role in matchmaking. Since marriage is considered a crucial institution for sustaining cultural values, the responsibility of selecting a suitable partner does not rest solely on the individuals getting married. Instead, family elders, sometimes with the assistance of community leaders or village heads, assess potential matches based on various criteria, such as caste, economic status, and social background. Compatibility is determined not only by individual traits but also by family reputation and shared values.

The process of matchmaking typically begins when a young man or woman reaches marriageable age, which, in traditional settings, is often determined by the customs of the tribe. Families initiate discussions with other families within the community to identify suitable matches. Once a prospective partner is found, both families engage in extensive deliberations before finalizing the marriage. This communal involvement ensures that marriages are in accordance with the tribe's customs and that both families benefit from the union.

Simplification of Marriage Customs

Marriage ceremonies among the Paniya tribe are steeped in rituals that reflect their cultural heritage. Once a match is finalized, an engagement ceremony is arranged, during which gifts are exchanged between the families to symbolize their agreement. This stage is considered crucial as it formally recognizes the alliance between the two families.

The wedding ceremony itself is a grand event involving multiple traditional practices. One of the most significant customs is the performance of rituals that seek blessings from ancestors and deities. These ceremonies often include prayers, dances, and symbolic offerings, reinforcing the spiritual aspect of marriage.

Traditional music and folk songs play an essential role in the celebrations, creating an atmosphere of joy and festivity.

Another key feature of Paniya marriages is the community's involvement in the wedding preparations. Unlike in many urban settings where weddings are private affairs, Paniya tribal marriages are communal events, with members of the village actively participating in organizing and conducting the ceremonies. Feasts are prepared, and special foods are served, signifying the shared happiness of the community.

Arranged marriages in the Paniya tribe are not solely based on personal compatibility but also involve social and economic considerations. Traditionally, marriage serves as a means of maintaining stability within the community and ensuring economic support between families. For instance, families often prefer matches within the same economic group to ensure financial security. Additionally, factors such as land ownership, employment status, and family standing within the tribe influence the selection of a partner.

In some cases, dowry or bride price practices may be observed, though these customs vary among different subgroups of the Paniya tribe. The exchange of gifts between families is often seen as a gesture of goodwill and a means of strengthening the newly formed bond. While economic factors play a role, tribal customs emphasize mutual respect and the welfare of both families involved.

Traditional Paniya marriages, like many indigenous customs, assign distinct roles to men and women. The groom is often expected to demonstrate his ability to provide for the family, while the bride's role is typically centered around household responsibilities and contributing to the community's welfare. These roles, though rooted in tradition, have been evolving over time with increasing modernization and changing societal norms.

While arranged marriages historically placed more decision-making power in the hands of family elders, contemporary influences have led to greater agency for the bride and groom in choosing their partners. Today, many young members of the Paniya tribe actively participate in discussions about their future spouses, and in some cases, individuals are given the freedom to reject a proposed match. Compared to other communities, Paniya people's marriages were primarily based on personal choice.

The Paniya people recognized that marriage is a time-consuming endeavor and sought to simplify its customs while reducing the associated economic burden. Additionally, the community views marriage primarily as a means of procreation and child-rearing, emphasizing its role in fostering a fulfilling familial life.

Phases of Marriage

Marriage in the Paniya community is a deeply significant event, rooted in tradition and cultural heritage. It is not merely a union of two individuals but a bond that strengthens family and community ties. The marriage ceremonies are conducted under the guidance of the Mooppan (elder), who oversees each ritual to ensure adherence to ancestral customs.

The Paniya wedding is a multi-phased event that involves various elaborate rituals, beginning with pre-marriage negotiations and culminating in the bride's integration into the groom's household. Symbolic exchanges, traditional songs and dances, and communal participation are essential elements of the celebration. Each phase of the marriage reflects the Paniya people's collective values, spiritual beliefs, and emphasis on familial harmony.

Like all ceremonies in the Paniya community, marriage is considered a very important event. All rituals in the Paniya community are conducted by the Mooppan (also known as Chemmi or Koyma).

After selecting the bride, the groom's Mooppan, along with his uncles and other important members, visits the bride's house to offer money. In this ceremony, betel leaves and a small stick tied with a thread are placed together. After this ritual, the bride's family states a specific amount that needs to be given by the groom's family. Once the payment is made, the groom's family must visit the bride's house at least four more times.

Following this, a ritual called Kollum Valliyum takes place. The groom's family then presents the bride with betel leaves, adakka (areca nut), two bangles, earrings, a necklace, a nose ring, and a traditional garment (kandam mundu). From this point until the wedding, the groom is responsible for all of the bride's expenses, which is referred to as Vadhuvinulla Chelavu (the bride's expenses).

Afterward, the marriage takes place. One person from the groom's house and one from the bride's house are exchanged, and they are called 'Naduvan'. Once they arrive—whether at the bride's or groom's house—a night of singing and dancing is held.

On the morning of the wedding, the Mooppan places some rice and money inside a bundle of grass, among other items. This is called Kaanamoda. All these items are tied together in a sack and are carried by a key figure from the groom's family, known as the Naduvan's uncle or Munnai Karan. He takes the bundle to the bride's house in a procession with dance and music. Upon arrival, a lamp is lit, and the bride's family is called. Only after this can the groom's family begin singing and dancing. The celebrations continue with more music and dance.

The groom is then seated in the courtyard, his head wrapped with a turban, and rice is placed on a banana leaf in front of him. The groom is made to sit on it. After this, the bride is brought inside and seated next to the groom on the Kaanamoda. The Mooppan then brings two vessels of water and places them at their feet. He takes the water and pours it over their feet, hands, and heads as part of the ritual.

After this ceremony, the bride and groom are dressed and seated. More singing and dancing follow. After the meal, when the bride is taken down, the Mooppan from the bride's family ties a grass ring on both the bride's and groom's heads, a ritual known as Chungkam Pikkunnu. Before the bride leaves her home, she is given pumpkin, ash gourd, and seeds from her family. After marriage, the bride takes these to the groom's house and plants them there.

The Rituals and Practices of Paniya Marriage

Marriage holds great significance in the Paniya community, just like other ceremonies. All wedding rituals are conducted by the elder, known as the Chemmi or Koyma. The process begins with a formal meeting between the bride and the groom's family. Accompanied by the elder, maternal uncles, and other important members, the groom's family visits the bride's house to present money. A betel leaf and a small thread are placed together as part of the ritual. Following this, the bride's family requests a specific amount as a dowry. Once the money is given, the groom's family must visit the bride's house at least four times before the wedding.

A ceremony called Kolum Valli follows, during which the groom's family gifts the bride with betel leaves, areca nuts, two hand bangles, earrings, a garland, a nose ring, and a Kandam Mundu (traditional garment). From this point until the wedding, the groom assumes financial responsibility for the bride, a practice known as "bride expenses."

On the wedding day, a designated person from the groom's family, known as the Naduvan, plays a key role. Whether the wedding is held at the bride's or the groom's house, the celebration includes dancing and singing the night before the ceremony. On the morning of the wedding, the elder prepares a ritual offering called Kanamoda, which consists of rice and money wrapped in grass. These are placed in a sack and carried to the bride's house by Naduvinte Maman or Munnai Karan, accompanied by singing and dancing.

Upon arrival at the bride's house, a wick is lit, signaling the bride's family to participate. Only then does the groom's family resume singing and dancing. The groom is seated in the courtyard, and a turban is placed on his head. Rice is laid on a banana leaf, and the groom is positioned on it. The bride is then brought in, and both are seated together for the Kanamoda ritual. The elder arrives with two vessels of water and pours it over the couple's hands, feet, and heads as a blessing. After this, the couple is formally prepared and seated, while more singing and dancing take place.

Following the wedding feast, another significant ritual called Chungam Pikkunnu is performed. The elder from the bride's house ties a symbolic band around the bride's and groom's heads. Before leaving her home, the bride is given a pumpkin and Kumbalam seeds, which she must take to her new home and plant there.

Changes in Paniya Wedding Traditions

Traditional Paniya weddings have undergone significant transformations over time. Many customs have faded, and the role of the elder has diminished. In the past, the elder played a central role in wedding rituals, but today, their involvement is minimal. Modern Paniya weddings are more simplified, with fewer traditional customs.

Additionally, there have been noticeable changes in dress and food. Previously, weddings were held in homes, but now they often take place in auditoriums or temples. The attire and jewelry styles have also modernized, reflecting broader cultural influences. These changes indicate a shift away from traditional customs, leading to the gradual disappearance of some of the Paniya community's unique wedding practices.

Key Factors Behind Evolving Marriage Traditions

The Paniya community, an indigenous tribal group primarily residing in the southern Indian states of Kerala and Karnataka, has undergone significant transformations over the years. These changes have not only impacted their cultural practices, customs, and traditions but have also influenced their marriage system. The evolution of marriage in the Paniya community is driven by various factors, including education, modernization, socio-economic changes, and the influence of mainstream society. This essay explores how these elements have contributed to the shifting nature of marriage in the Paniya community.

Educational Influence on Marriage

Historically, the Paniya community relied on oral traditions and practical knowledge passed down through generations. Their education was informal and closely tied to their environment, emphasizing skills related to agriculture, forest resource collection, and traditional handicrafts. However, the implementation of educational policies, such as the Right to Education Act (2009), has facilitated formal education for Paniya children. Government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have established special residential schools and bilingual education programs to bridge the gap between traditional knowledge and modern education.

Despite these efforts, many Paniya children still face challenges in continuing their education beyond primary and secondary levels. Economic constraints often push parents to prioritize income-generating activities over schooling. Nevertheless, access to education has played a crucial role in altering marriage practices within the community. Educated Paniya youth are more inclined towards love marriages rather than arranged ones, and women have begun delaying marriage to pursue further studies or careers. This shift has also resulted in a reduction in early marriages, which were once common in the community.

Modernization and Its Impact on Marriage Practices

Modernization has significantly influenced the Paniya community, bringing both opportunities and challenges. Traditionally reliant on agriculture, many Paniyas have transitioned to wage labor due to the expansion of modern employment opportunities. With the advent of infrastructure development, government welfare programs, and healthcare initiatives, the Paniya community has witnessed an improvement in their overall living standards.

One of the most notable changes is the transformation in wedding ceremonies. In the past, Paniya marriages were simple affairs conducted at home or in sacred groves (kavu), attended mainly by family members and elders. These ceremonies included traditional songs, dances, and symbolic rituals. Today, however, Paniya weddings have become more elaborate, often held in temples or rented auditoriums. Modern weddings now include professional photography and videography, elements that were once absent in traditional ceremonies. The increased cost of these celebrations highlights the economic shift within the community.

Changes in Clothing and Jewelry

With modernization, there have also been noticeable changes in the attire of the Paniya people. Historically, women wore a simple arati and mund, while men dressed in mund and shirts. Today, however, many Paniyas wear modern clothing similar to that of other communities. While some women in rural areas still maintain traditional dress, urban Paniyas have embraced contemporary fashion.

Jewelry styles have also evolved. In earlier times, Paniya women wore specific ornaments during significant life events, such as talikkalla and palkalla for weddings, kurimudachil for puberty ceremonies, and kallumala for death rituals. However, these ornaments have largely fallen out of use. Instead, women now wear tali, a wedding ornament common in Hindu communities, and have discontinued wearing traditional jewelry in other ceremonies.

Dietary Changes in Weddings

The traditional wedding diet of the Paniya community consisted of wild tubers like noora, kachil, and venni, along with honey and other foraged foods. Over time, dietary habits have shifted to incorporate more non-vegetarian dishes and commercially available food items. The influence of mainstream society has led to a departure from traditional food practices, with wedding feasts now resembling those of other communities.

Socio-Economic Changes and their Influence on Marriage

The Paniya community was historically marginalized and socially and economically disadvantaged. Many worked as bonded laborers under landlords, living in poor conditions with limited access to education and healthcare. However, modernization and urbanization have led to significant socio-economic advancements.

Improved education and employment opportunities have allowed many Paniyas to break free from the cycle of poverty. With better financial stability, wedding ceremonies have become more extravagant, and younger generations have adopted new customs influenced by mainstream society. Additionally, the language patterns of the Paniya community have evolved, with many adopting Malayalam or Kannada over their native dialect, further illustrating the impact of socio-economic progress on cultural identity.

The integration of the Paniya community into mainstream society has brought both benefits and challenges. On one hand, the abolition of bonded labor has granted Paniyas freedom, and government schemes have introduced livelihood programs that promote self-employment and small-scale industries. Education and healthcare access have also improved significantly.

On the other hand, the cultural erosion of the Paniya community has become a growing concern. Traditional customs, language, and attire have been replaced by mainstream influences. Marriage rituals that once held deep cultural significance are now increasingly aligned with those of the dominant society. Many Paniyas have also adopted new religious practices, shifting away from their animistic traditions. Social discrimination and marginalization continue to persist, affecting their overall well-being.

DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

The central authority of the Mooppan (Chemmi/Koyma) in supervising rituals and mediating alliances reflects the structural–functional framework of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown as articulated in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. Radcliffe-Brown emphasized that social institutions persist because they maintain structural continuity and social equilibrium. The field data—showing elder supervision of negotiations, ritual regulation of procedures, and collective approval of unions—demonstrates that marriage among the Paniya is not merely a personal contract but an institutional mechanism of social regulation. The Mooppan's authority stabilizes kinship ties and ensures that marriage reinforces, rather than disrupts, the moral structure of the community.

The structured exchanges embedded in Paniya marriage—bride price negotiations, ceremonial visits, betel leaf exchange, ornament gifting, Kanamoda rituals, and the Naduvan's mediation—closely align with Claude Lévi-Strauss's alliance theory in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Lévi-Strauss conceptualized marriage as a

system of reciprocal exchange between groups rather than a union of isolated individuals. Similarly, the documented negotiations of payments, shared responsibilities, and symbolic gift exchange in Paniya marriages reveal a system of inter-lineage reciprocity. Marriage thus functions as an alliance-building institution, consolidating social solidarity and expanding networks of obligation and cooperation.

The rich ritual symbolism—water purification, seed planting of pumpkin and ash gourd, the grass ring ceremony (Chungam Pikkunnu), and communal feasting—resonates with anthropological discussions of ritual meaning found in Robert H. Lowie's *Primitive Society* and Meyer's analyses of tribal ritual structures. These ceremonies encode fertility symbolism, agrarian continuity, and ancestral linkage. The collective singing traditions such as Vattakali and Kambalakkali reinforce shared emotional energy and communal participation. In this respect, the marriage ceremony exemplifies Émile Durkheim's concept of collective solidarity, where ritual gatherings renew collective consciousness and affirm shared identity through symbolic performance.

Within the broader Indian tribal context, the institutional embedding of marriage in economic cooperation and social continuity reflects the comprehensive documentation of tribal systems by K. S. Singh in *The Scheduled Tribes* and his later work on tribal marriage customs. Singh underscores that tribal marriages are inseparable from economic reciprocity, caste alignment, and land-based considerations—elements clearly visible in the Paniya context. Furthermore, Virginius Xaxa in *Tribes of India: Struggle for Survival* argues that modernization reshapes tribal institutions without erasing their symbolic core. The observed simplification of ceremonies, reduced elder dominance, temple-based weddings, and adoption of modern attire illustrate this adaptive transformation rather than institutional decline.

Kerala-specific ethnographies further substantiate these findings. The detailed accounts in *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* by Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, along with A. A. D. Luiz's *Tribes of Kerala*, describe arranged alliances, ritual gift exchanges, and elder mediation patterns comparable to those observed among the Paniya. More specifically, P. Somasekharan Nair's ethnographic work on the Paniyan tribe corroborates the authority of the Mooppan, ritual phases such as Kolum Valli, and bride expense customs. The present field analysis therefore both confirms classical ethnography and updates it by documenting contemporary shifts.

Debates on gender roles also offer an interpretive lens. In *The Mothers*, Robert Briffault posits the foundational role of women in early social organization. Although Paniya marriage displays predominantly patriarchal features—such as the groom's provider role—the ritual centrality of the bride in fertility rites and seed-planting ceremonies symbolically underscores women's reproductive and social significance. These symbolic elements subtly echo Briffault's argument regarding the cultural centrality of women in sustaining lineage continuity.

The transformation evident in recent practices—love marriages, delayed marriage age, and decline of early unions—corresponds with modernization perspectives discussed by K. S. Singh and elaborated in *Economic and Political Weekly* by Virginius Xaxa. Expansion of education following the Right to Education Act has fostered individual agency, companionate marriage trends, and legal awareness, including concerns under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act examined by Rajasree and Kalesh. These developments signal a gradual shift from alliance-based kinship regulation toward individual-choice marriages, though community validation remains influential.

Finally, the movement from agrarian ritual economy to monetized ceremonial culture further illustrates adaptive change. Traditional Paniya weddings were community-centered and resource-sharing events. Contemporary practices—auditorium weddings, professional photography, modern attire, and increased expenditure—indicate integration into broader market-oriented cultural forms. Consistent with Xaxa's thesis, tribal institutions do not disappear under economic mobility; rather, they recalibrate, retaining symbolic frameworks while accommodating new socio-economic realities.

CONCLUSION

The marriage system in the Paniya community has undergone profound changes due to education, modernization, socio-economic developments, and the influence of mainstream society. Traditional marriage

customs, once centered around simple and culturally rich ceremonies, have now been replaced by more elaborate and expensive celebrations. The increasing prevalence of love marriages, changing dietary habits, and modifications in clothing and jewelry reflect the broader transformations within the community.

While modernization has brought numerous advantages, it has also posed challenges in preserving the cultural heritage of the Paniya people. Efforts should be made to balance progress with cultural preservation, ensuring that the unique traditions of the Paniya community remain intact while allowing individuals the freedom to embrace new opportunities. Respecting individual choices while safeguarding communal heritage will be crucial in shaping the future of marriage and cultural identity in the Paniya community.

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