



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### AN ANALYSIS OF EXCHANGE MARRIAGES (WATTA-SATTA) PRACTICES IN SOME AGRARIAN COMMUNITIES IN HARYANA

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#### ABSTRACT

Artificial Marriage as a socio-cultural institution varies widely across communities and regions in India. In Haryana, certain agrarian communities have historically practiced exchange marriages, or Watta-Satta, as a culturally sanctioned way to maintain economic and social equilibrium. This paper examines the nature, causes, and impact of Watta-Satta marriages among three prominent agrarian communities of Haryana — the Bishnoi, Ror, and Jat. The paper explores the mechanisms by which these marriages are negotiated, the implications on gender roles, and the social expectations imposed upon couples involved in such arrangements. It further investigates how disruptions in one marriage can have direct consequences for the reciprocally tied household. Special attention is paid to the voices of the younger generation, whose aspirations and changing values increasingly challenge the traditional foundations of this marital exchange system.

#### INTRODUCTION

Marriage is not only a legally binding contract but also a cultural construct deeply rooted in tradition, religion, and social structure. Among Hindus, there exist numerous rules related to marital arrangements — from exogamy and endogamy to dowry practices and caste-based limitations. In the north Indian state of Haryana, these rules manifest uniquely in the form of exchange marriages, commonly referred to as Watta-Satta. This system involves the simultaneous marriage of a brother-sister pair from two families, where a male member of one family marries the female of another, and vice versa. Although this practice reduces financial burdens and strengthens social ties, it often eliminates the autonomy of individuals, particularly women, in choosing their life partners. The tradition is prevalent among agrarian communities such as the Bishnois, Rors, and Jats, each having their own cultural interpretations and socio-economic motivations for continuing this practice. This study aims to explore the structure and implications of exchange marriages in these communities. Watta-Satta is an Urdu word denotes a give-take form of bride exchange that is common practice in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Watta-Satta involves the simultaneous marriage of brother and sister pair from two households. In some cases, it involves uncle niece pairs, or cousin pairs (Sajid Chaudhary, 2008). It is a form of bride exchange that is common in Pakistan and Afghanistan (Jacoby and Mansuri (2007), latif, Z (2010). In rural parts of Pakistan, watta-satta accounts for over 30% of all marriages. Watta-Satta is more than just an exchange of women from two families or clans, sometime it becomes a cause of mutual threat across the marriages. The Watta- Satta (exchange) marriage is a traditional way of marriage prevailing and its occurrence is

due to several reasons such as social, cultural and economic. Watta-Satta choice of marriage is not given to male or female, those are going to make families and its result divorce, separation and tension among families as well as it reduces divorce rate compared to conventional marriages.

**Conceptual Framing:** Exchange marriage, or watta-satta, is a complex socio-cultural practice rooted in deeply entrenched systems of kinship, caste-endogamy, economic reciprocity, and patriarchal control. Conceptually, it operates as a "mutual threat system" in which two families exchange brides to ensure marital discipline and reciprocity. The fate of one marriage is intrinsically tied to the success or failure of the other. This reciprocal dependence is not merely cultural but serves as a structural deterrent to divorce and conflict. While proponents argue that this system offers economic and social stability by reducing dowry demands and strengthening kinship ties, critics highlight that it reduces individuals—especially women—to bargaining tools within male-dominated family negotiations. This form of marital arrangement reflects Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence, where the dominated internalize their domination. As such, watta-satta becomes both a means of social cohesion and a mechanism of gendered control.

#### Community Profiles and Marital Traditions

**Bishnoi Community:** The Bishnoi community, primarily found in the western regions of India including Rajasthan and parts of Haryana, is known for its ecological philosophy and deep-rooted religious beliefs. In Haryana, Bishnois are concentrated in the districts of Hisar, Sirsa, and Fatehabad. Adhering strictly to the 29 principles laid down by their founder Guru Jambheshwar, Bishnoishave preserved a distinctive identity. Due to their smaller population size and emphasis on intra-community marriages to preserve religious and cultural purity,

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Bishnois often face limitations in match-making. This led to the emergence and sustenance of exchange marriages as a practical solution, helping maintain purity and reducing dowry-related pressures while fostering familial alliances.

**Ror Community:** The Ror community is an agriculturally dominant group primarily settled in Haryana's eastern districts such as Karnal, Panipat, and Kaithal. Known for their close-knit village networks, strong clan affiliations, and a tradition of self-governance, Rors have historically emphasized endogamy within their community and preferred marital alliances that reinforce social solidarity. Exchange marriages among Rors are driven by both economic and cultural imperatives. These arrangements serve to balance family responsibilities, maintain social reciprocity, and bypass dowry exchanges. Ror elders often act as key mediators in finalizing such marriages, ensuring community interests are prioritized over individual desires.

**Jat Community:** The Jat community, spread across all districts of Haryana, is perhaps the most politically and economically influential caste group in the region. Deeply rooted in agriculture and land ownership, Jats follow patriarchal norms and uphold khap panchayat decisions in rural settings. Exchange marriages among Jats are practiced with a view to secure social equality, reinforce familial bonds, and avoid dowry complications. However, given the community's strong attachment to tradition, these marriages can also become sources of conflict when the marital balance is disturbed on one side. Dual breakdowns, honor-based conflicts, and the reinforcement of patriarchal control over women are commonly observed patterns. Nevertheless, a shift is occurring as younger Jats, especially those educated and urbanized, begin to question the moral and practical relevance of Watta-Satta.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many studies have been conducted in India and outside to know some particular aspects of Exchange marriage such as Carsteen (1997) stated about exchange marriage that although one intention of a kin marriage might be strengthen family ties, if conflict did occur between husband and wife, and particularly if they divorced, wider relationship might get involve in deeply in an argument and conflict. Ahmed (2003) described that another variation of forced marriage is exchange marriages known as watta- satta. In such a situation a brother and sister were married off to another pair of siblings. He noted that discord in one family tended to affect other family. Jacoby and Mansuri (2006) stated that, a bride exchange between families coupled with a mutual threat of retaliation. A sample comprising 3100 married women age 15-40 in households collected randomly from 171 villages of Punjab and Sindh. Major finding of the study revealed that- Inefficiency is significantly less likely to occur in watta-satta marriages than in conventional marriage, if someone marry with a relative it reduces the incidence of domestic violence. World bank (2006) policy research paper found that that watta-satta is a tacit agreement among the families for each husband to retaliate in kind against his wife in case of the other husband malfeasance (wrong doing) as maltreating one's wife, a husband risks having his sister maltreated by her husband, a mutual deterrent (restraint) which raises each wife bargaining power within their respective marriage. Watta-Satta is motivated by a desire to limit dowry expenses as the advantage of marrying one's daughter into one's son's wife's family is that there may be no

need exchange dowries and this would be desirable when parents are severely cash constraints. 70 % of current *watta-satta* brides strongly in the favors of exchange marriage and 13 of respondent strongly disfavor. Women from poor family or have low status are more likely to enter into watta-satta system. Charsley (2007) pointed out that *watta-satta* is the perfect example of the risk of the double *rista* as the straight avenue will be taken on your daughter and the risk of your son's marriage run into difficulty. Exchange marriage constitutes the view where the balance altered (vary) in the risk and the advantage goes to close kin marriage where the conflicts were minimized by families. In *watta-satta* every side had possibility to administer a direct blow to the others family esteem and caused hardships to a daughter of the other side. Banerjee et. al (2009) denote that -there is a very strong liking for within-caste marriage. The groups are fairly homogeneous in their qualities as well as the cost of doing within caste marriage is low so groups prefer endogamous marriages. Sikdar (2009) revealed that- tribal endogamy marriage is followed by 70.17% people and tribal exogamy is followed by 29.83% people, marriage through capture is not followed due to following Christianity religion, acquire mates through capture is still going on in songsareks (non-Christian), males are getting educated and sending marriage proposal to brides, young generation is engaged indifferent types of activities to earn their livelihood and find it very difficult to form nokphante (a traditional bachelor dormitory), to take divorce in Christianity is very difficult as church authority doesn't allow the couple to go for divorce easily as well as now the legal process are very complicated, a new trend is occurring as nokrom is formed in separate neolocal residence and 15.6% cases where nokram is formed into patrilocal residence.

Bukhari (2010) asserted that some customary practices like watta-satta, kala-kali are the major aspects which prevails in society that force women to marry in exchange as well as in early age. Property matter also pushes women behind and this atmosphere is exploiting women mentally and physically. Zhang (2010) revealed that both man and women propensity towards marriage is falling. The trend of exchange marriage within adjacent villages is increasing. More authority has been delegated to women to choose their life partner which changes the socio-economic circumstances of rural profile in China. Timothy et. al (2010) describe that what are the driving forces behind the decline of marriage and the rise of unwed parenting for children and for society. They further revealed that age at marriage is being increasing and more than half of American prefers to live in cohabitations. Family and religious traditions lose influence, people craft their own biographies through highly individualized choices, including choice of intimate partners, people have made marriage institution as a source of satisfaction in hectic life whichever they can come out anytime and for both male and female students mutual love and attraction as more important today than in earlier decades and last but not the least Unmarried young adults are much less likely to be living with their parents than in generations past as they are getting more freedom. Desai(2010) reveals that marriage decisions remain within the purview of the family, and less than 5% of the respondents had a primary role in choosing their husbands. However, nearly 62% of the respondent felt that they are not consulted regarding this and about 55% met their husbands on the day of the wedding. Most women marry between the ages of 14 and 25, with a particularly tight clustering between the northern states of Punjab has higher age at marriage than the southern state of

Andhra Pradesh; and one communist state (Kerala) has a mean age at marriage of 21 while the other communist state (West Bengal) has a mean age of 18. A woman's name on a housing title reflects both lending practices in the area as well as familial economic strategy such as- the home is often placed in a woman's name to prevent foreclosure in the event of business reversals. Dawn (2011) stated that the motivation of parents which force their daughters and sons into barter marriage is that such marriage is that such marriages ensure instinctive reciprocity that allows a father to manage the welfare of his daughter by linking it directly with the welfare of his son in laws sister. It is known as strategy mutual assured destruction which is recognized by defense strategies being an effective deterrent to hostilities. Land gentry choose this system in order to maintain their land holdings intact and poor illiterate parents may choose wata-satta marriages for their children for economic reasons. Some parents may use their daughter as bait to get a mate for their son, who may not be fit for marriages. Consanguineous marriages are censured by geneticist for having higher rate of congenital diseases among children. Singh(2011) found that-women preferred love marriages instead of arrange marriage as women have the right of final saying about their marriage, divorce is not taboo but occur very scarcely, many men marry with youngest daughter for her property. Boys are also getting share in property but prevailing in educated and high-class societies, both boys and girls have been given equal chances to study, women take less participation in political affairs. Saina et. al (2011) found that daughter is accounted as a responsibility or a burden: - most of the parents consider a daughter as a burden and should be married as soon as they grow up, Social and sexual innocence: - most of the fathers denied any responsibilities and claimed this is the domain of their wives, parents roles in preparation for marriage- it reveals that father is the main decision maker in the selection of a groom for their daughters. Muhammad (2013) study deals with the traditional, changing gender role and relationship in the exchange marriage system in south Punjab at Pakistan.

It scrutinizes the structural roles and individual independent choice. Pre-determined structure roles were more influential and they have more importance than the individual choice. It discloses that perpetual (continuous) tension between structure forces and individual agency: man wanted to exercise their choices but the society put forces on him. The study analyzes the tension of respondents and the process of slight social change under given circumstances. Dhar (2013) observed that what, issues and challenges have to be faced when someone does inter caste marriage by ignoring traditional culture of arranged marriage. Snowball and Purposive methods of sampling have been chosen to conduct an interview of 15 couples. Major finding of the study denotes that- caste system is mostly widespread in rural India, which criticize inter caste wedding and those couple disobey these conservative rules and norms, have to face extremely serious outcomes. Prakash and Singh (2013) observed that current changes whichever are prevailing in mate selection preferences and its repercussion on various social institutions. A multistage stratified random sampling was used to select households for Interview. Major finding of the study denotes that- Western ideologies are putting influence as well as changing the process of mate selection in traditional rural societies. Women have started expressing their proclivity (likings) related to their future partners and last but not the least the influence of caste and religion is declining to hold their importance in the marriage

market. As both men and women are becoming more selective in finalizing their marriage proposals. Soomro et.al (2013) examine the phenomenon of exchange marriages and revealed its demerits in front of society. The study relied on primary data whichever collected from rural area of Sindh, Pakistan. Major finding of the study revealed that – illiteracy and desire of political, social and economic sources is the root cause for the prevalence of such kind of marriages and which led to alienation, domestic abuse and contravention of human rights. Literacy campaign should be organized; severe legislation should be framed for dowry practices are the major recommendations given by the study.

Kukreja and Kumar (2013) revealed that – shortage of women is not common across all caste groups in the conjugal regions but is endemic (widespread) in dominant cast groups of Jats and Yadavs. Region bride forces her husband to break away the joint family and set up a separate household of his own and cross region brides' resort to self-imposed isolation in order to minimize contact with either family members or women in the community. Zaman (2013) pointed out the condition of the children, which are living under the system of the exchange marriage and the impact of exchange marriage on the children. Finding of their study revealed that-Revenge taking is common in the exchange marriage, whatever the cost, couples have to pay, Children are often taken as commodity in the hands of the parents or the state, Children have no freedom for mate selection, as their life partner decided by their parent even before their birth, To do exchange marriage it is part of custom and girl child have no right to disobey and The chance of broken homes in exchange system is higher which leads toward delinquency and criminality. Ahuja and Osterman (2015) stated that 54% people of upper caste and 71% of schedule caste give preference to inter caste marriages, those have sound socio economic condition as well as belongs to upper caste prefer arranged marriages but in schedule castes the tendency is found inversely and last but not the least arranged-marriages markets in urban India is functioning on the principle of exchange (Dowry). K.G. Sanhya et. al (2015) found that- near about 66% women had married before age of 18, education level was very low of those women, married in early age, and respondents who had married early were somewhat more likely than other women to have worked before marriage and young women of age 18 or older reject wife beating and they used contraceptive to delay their first pregnancy.

#### ***Exchange Marriages: Patterns, Pressures, and Implications:***

Across the Bishnoi, Ror, and Jat communities, Watta-Satta marriages are practiced under the framework of mutual obligation and social harmony. These marriages are not simply familial exchanges; they are embedded within a system of collective honor. For instance, if a man mistreats his wife, he risks retaliation against his sister in the reciprocal household, thereby discouraging abuse but also linking two women's fates tightly to each other. The practice thus reduces dowry burden but amplifies the social cost of marital discord. Watta-Satta may be seen as a deterrent to divorce due to these entangled risks, yet it can trap women in toxic marital environments. Across the three communities, families see Watta-Satta as a means of stabilizing inter-family relations and preserving traditional structures. However, it also curtails personal agency and reinforces gender inequality, as most marital decisions are made by elders or community leaders without the consent of those actually marrying.

## CONCLUSION AND FINDING

This study highlights that while the practice of Watta-Satta serves certain economic and cultural purposes in agrarian Haryana, its social and emotional costs are significant. Among the Bishnois, the practice emerges from the need to preserve religious identity. Among Rors and Jats, it serves both as a dowry-avoidance mechanism and a means of social reciprocity. Despite these motivations, the interlinked nature of such marriages often results in suppressed individual freedoms and heightened emotional strain. Especially for women, the system reduces autonomy and enforces conformity. These marriages are deeply embedded in patriarchal logic, where men negotiate alliances and women are exchanged as social capital. The absence of women's agency in choosing life partners, the prioritization of family honor over personal well-being, and the relegation of women to submissive roles within the household exemplify the gendered power imbalance. In Haryana's rural caste societies, male elders and *khap* panchayats often endorse such marriages, reinforcing traditional norms and silencing dissent. The watta-satta is facing some problems like non availability of the pairs with the parents, un-matched marriages and incidents dual domestic violence etc. However, the winds of change are evident. Education, urbanization, and media exposure have empowered the younger generation to challenge traditional norms. Increasingly, voices within these communities are advocating for freedom in mate selection, gender equality, and re-evaluation of marital traditions. Future studies should aim to provide more empirical data and case-specific insights to guide progressive change in these communities.

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