

Marriage (Benja) Negotiations among Kisan Tribes: Women as Custodians of Indigenous Water Management Knowledge in Matrimonial Exchange

Bharati Kujur¹, Dr. Babita Das²

¹Ph.D. Scholar in Sociology,
Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS) Deemed to be University, Bhubaneswar

²Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology,
Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS) Deemed to be University, Bhubaneswar

Corresponding Author: Bharati Kujur

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20260945>

ABSTRACT

The Kisan tribe, an indigenous community of eastern India, possesses a rich tradition of ecological knowledge passed down through generations. Among its cultural institutions, the Benja marriage system plays a significant role in shaping family relationships and supporting the transmission of traditional knowledge. This study explores the role of Kisan women in preserving and transmitting indigenous water knowledge within families formed through Benja marriages. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through field observations, semi-structured interviews, and discussions with women, elders, and community members from selected Kisan villages. The findings reveal that women are the primary custodians of indigenous water knowledge, including water-source identification, conservation methods, seasonal water management, and household water-use practices. They transmit this knowledge through daily activities, oral traditions, observation, and participation in community rituals. The study highlights the crucial contribution of Kisan women to cultural continuity and emphasizes their role in promoting sustainable water resource management within the community.

Keywords: Kisan tribe, Cultural institutions, Benja marriage, Water management

INTRODUCTION

In Indigenous societies, marriage is more than just a personal and familial relationship; it is an important institution that helps to transmit social order, culture, and the environment from one generation to the next. Among the tribes, the marriage system is often part of a larger exchange system that governs the exchange of resources, kinship, and community obligations. For centuries, anthropological studies have identified marriage as a social institution that helps to maintain social identity and create economic and ecological connections among Indigenous peoples. (Levi-Strauss, 1969) Local marriage in the area, known as Benja, is of significant importance in the community life of the Kisan tribes in Eastern India. Benja is not just a ceremony and marriage between two people, but a negotiation process between families, elders and customary institutions. These negotiations lead to social alliances, reciprocal responsibilities and cultural values and skills being passed on. Existing research on tribal marriage has concentrated on kinship structures, bridewealth, inheritance, and social

organization, but few studies have been undertaken on the environmental aspects that are part of matrimonial exchange. (Beteille, 1998)

Indigenous peoples have long-standing relationships to their environments that have led to the development of rich systems of ecological knowledge. This knowledge involves skills of agriculture, forestry, conservation of biodiversity and water use. Those studying the field of Indigenous Knowledge Systems have noted that ecological knowledge can be maintained outside of formal institutions, such as through intergenerational learning, ritual and social activities (Berkes, 2018). In this context, marriage is an important social field for the diffusion and adaptation of environmental knowledge.

In the kisan community, women have an important role to play in maintaining water management practices at the household and community level. They often are tasked with knowing where to find water in certain seasons, to manage domestic water usage, to keep traditional water conservation practices alive, and to disseminate environmental information to younger generations. This practice highlights that women are not just involved in the marriage exchange but also as active managers of Indigenous ecological systems. Wives carry local knowledge, from household to household, settlement to settlement, and bring environmental continuity and community resilience. (Munda, 2003)

It is a viewpoint that expands the traditional view of marriage to its ecological dimension. A gender analysis of Benja negotiations, however, sheds light on how matrimonial institutions can be seen as a means to keep environmental practices alive and social adaptability. This study, therefore, examines the role of women in the conservation and transmission of the indigenous knowledge of water resources management in the context of negotiation in marriage among the Kisan tribes, showing the interdependency of gender, culture and ecological sustainability. (Agarwal, 1992)

Objective of the Study

The study aims to:

- ✓ Examine the structure and cultural meaning of Benja negotiations among Kisan tribes.
- ✓ Explore women's role in preserving and transmitting indigenous water management practices.
- ✓ Analyze the relationship between matrimonial exchange and ecological sustainability.
- ✓ Understand how traditional knowledge strengthens community resilience.

METHODOLOGY

The present research paper adopted design used in this study is qualitative research which is purely based on secondary data analysis. The research is based on published books, journal articles, research papers and published International Organizations, relevant online databases and archives related to the Kisan tribe, marriage practices, women roles and indigenous ecological knowledge. Thematic content analysis is used to analyze the collected data to find patterns and to understand the relationship between Benja negotiation, marriage customs and the transmission of ecological knowledge among Kisan women. The study is mainly conducted in the Kisan tribal community of eastern India with special emphasis on areas where traditional marriage and traditional knowledge is documented in existing literature.

Understanding Benja: Marriage Negotiation in Kisan Society

Benja is a marriage negotiation institution that is widely practiced among the Kisan tribe which has an important role in making marriages and keeping the community cohesive. Elderly and family members from both households discuss with each other issues related to family compatibility, social position, kinship, socioeconomic status and cultural obligations before the marriage is officially finalized. The process is not only used to arrange marriages, but also to help maintain traditional values and community

norms. Potential wives are evaluated through Benja for their ability to manage a household, agricultural work and customs that help in family welfare. In the agrarian society of Kisan women are expected to actively engage in farming, fetch water, conserve resources and pass on indigenous ecological knowledge. As such, Benja is an important cultural institution that helps pass down traditional knowledge from one generation to the next and strengthens the women's role in maintaining the life of the community and environmental protection.

Women as Custodians of Indigenous Water Management Knowledge

Indigenous water management knowledge is a valuable body of knowledge that is derived from centuries of experiencing the natural resource landscapes as a resource for the Kisan tribe. Women are important bearers of sustainable water practices, preserving, applying and transmitting it. They are on the first line of water acquisition, usage and conservation in the household and community. Traditional role of women in managing the domestic water needs consists of finding sources of water supply that are available in the season, monitoring water availability and taking water conservation measures when water is scarce. Their experience enables them to make informed decisions regarding water storage and usage, ensuring the efficient management of limited resources. Furthermore, women have a vast knowledge of the seasons and the patterns of rainfall, the level of ground water, the signs of the seasons in the environment that indicate water availability. (Scarborough, 1996)

Women play an important role in the water-related decision making in agricultural activities. They engage in practices related to irrigation, seed saving, soil moisture management and farming plans according to the seasonal conditions. This knowledge helps improve productivity in agriculture and sustainable use of natural resources. Moreover, ecological knowledge is passed on intergenerationally with a very important

role for women. In everyday life, through storytelling, observation and involvement in domestic and farm work, they teach children and newly married daughters of the traditional water management practices. Marriage is one of the significant ways in which this knowledge can flow between families and settlements, and ecological wisdom can be passed on and retained through time. Thus, Kisan women are important contributors to the welfare of their households, environmental sustainability and cultural continuity. (UNESCO, 2017)

Matrimonial Exchange as Ecological Exchange

Benja marriage negotiation process in Kisan society is not just a matter of forming social and familial alliances. It can also be used as a way to share and document knowledge of the environment and its use by indigenous groups. The engagement process entails women leaving their kith and kin homes to go to their husband's home, bringing along with them great experiences, skills, and environment they acquired in their homes. Consequently, matrimonial exchange is an important pathway for the flow of ecological knowledge between families and settlements. A major consequence of this is the dissemination of indigenous environmental practices. Newly married women bring new knowledge into their integration with their marital households, such as water conservation, agricultural techniques, resource management and adaptation to the seasons, which can be different to that of their husband's households. This exchange enhances local knowledge system and promotes the use of good environmental practice. Marriage also helps adaptation of local water-use strategies. Women have hands-on expertise on water collection, storage and different water conservation systems for particular ecological settings. As they move into a new home they bring with them knowledge that assists families in making more effective decisions about water use, especially in scarce times or when the environment is uncertain. (Warren, 1991)

In addition, as knowledge of ecology is shared in marriage, the resilience of communities against environmental stress is reinforced. Women share different experiences and adaptation strategies to support household adaptation to varying climatic conditions and resource constraints. As a result, women's ecological knowledge is given significant social value at the time of negotiation of marriage, as it not only benefits the household for its survival and welfare but also for the sustainability and resilience of the community. So, Benja can be considered as a social and ecological institution. (Murdock, 1949)

Challenge to Indigenous Knowledge Transmission

A series of current socio-economic and cultural changes is influencing how the indigenous ecological knowledge is transmitted in Kisan society. Such shifts create major problems in terms of continuity for traditional water-management, agricultural, and community-based environmental-governance practices. The rising migration from rural areas to urban areas is one of the most prominent challenges. Young people are leaving rural areas for city and semi-urban life for education and employment, leading to decreased involvement in rural traditional livelihoods, including agriculture and forestry. The loss of direct experiencing of ecological practices from elders, especially women, is a result.

An additional factor is the increasing reliance on contemporary water systems and external technological systems. Availability of piped water supply, borewells and government supported irrigation schemes has seen a decline in indigenous water management systems. These advances are great for convenience, but they can also help to ignore traditional knowledge of water sources, water conservation and indicators of local ecology. The reduction in involvement in customary institutions (Benja negotiation, etc.) and other mechanisms of community-based decision making also contributes to the

erosion of the transmission pathways for knowledge. These institutions have traditionally been important in integrating ecological knowledge into society, especially through marriage alliances and inter-household exchanges.

However, changing gender roles and aspirations are influencing the traditional roles of women. The spread of education and the exposure to modernity have led to a change in priorities, which sometimes leads to low involvement in agricultural and domestic ecological practices. These shifts are in essence an expression of empowerment, but they can also be a factor in reducing the amount of direct ecological learning. Lastly, there is a diminished role of indigenous environmental knowledge in development programmes. Formal systems tend to undervalue local knowledge in favour of scientific or technical methods and result in marginalization of knowledge and expertise in policy and planning. Combined, these constitute a significant threat to community-based water governance systems, where indigenous knowledge transmission is weakened, the resilience, sustainability, and adaptive capacity of Kisan society could be compromised in the face of environmental and socio-economic change.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that women's role in Kisan matrimonial system should be examined in the wider context of environmental stewardship, cultural continuity, and community-based ecological governance, in particular the Benja negotiation process. Women are not exclusively domestic or ritualistic actors; they are active agents and bearers of indigenous ecological knowledge that is used in daily life and work and contributes to the sustainability of environmental systems. The negotiation between Benja and its relation with ecological knowledge systems in indigenous societies can be seen as a case in point of this deep intertwining of social institutions and ecological knowledge systems. Marriage is a

more than social contract but is also a process in which knowledge, responsibilities and cultural values are transmitted between families. In these negotiations, women's capacity to manage household resources, particularly related to water and farming practices, are unconsciously evaluated and appraised. This is an example of the social recognition and integration of ecological competence in marriage practices.

The results also point to a way in which local people's knowledge is maintained in the social life of indigenous communities through internal social institutions, such as the Kisan. Household mobility of women enables the transfer of know-how on water conservation, seasonal adaptability, crop management and resource sustainability. This helps to build the adaptive capacity of communities to face environmental variations and resource limitations. Importantly, by acknowledging women's role in this system, it gives a further challenge to the mainstream development thinking which views environmental management as a 'purely technical' arena or as one largely dominated by men. Rather, the study emphasizes the relational, cultural and gendered nature of ecological knowledge. Women have a crucial role in balancing the ecology through their everyday interactions with natural resources as a result of their lived experiences.

In addition, the Benja system is an example of how indigenous knowledge is not fixed, but rather a process, changing over time in the process of social interactions, including marriage. Such reinforces the concept of cultural institution as a repository of the environmental wisdom. Development discourse can shift toward inclusive, culturally-sensitive approaches and respect for indigenous knowledge systems by recognizing women's ecological role. Overall, the study underscores the need to mainstream a gendered approach to environmental scholarship and policy. Incorporating women into the role of key knowledge holders in ecological knowledge transmission not only deepens current

knowledge of indigenous societies, but also helps in the creation of more sustainable and resilient environmental governance systems.

CONCLUSION

The negotiation of marriage among the Kisan tribe, especially the Benja system, is a socio-cultural practice that involves intricate processes of social reproduction and ecological continuity. The matrimonial system is not only used for the establishment of familial connections, but also to pass on and maintain local knowledge of the environment from one generation to another and from one home to the next. In this context women are positioned as key holders of indigenous knowledge related to water management. They move across marriage which helps to pass on the knowledge and experience that they gained in aspects of water conservation, agriculture, seasonal adjustments, and resource management. Women move from their natal homes to their marital homes and take with them practical ecological skills that aid in natural resource sustainable management in a variety of environmental settings. This knowledge is continually shared, keeping adaptive practices alive and responsive to varying environmental conditions. The study underscores the significance of women's role beyond the periphery of their daily existence in the domestic and agricultural spheres, indicating its essential contribution to the sustainability of community-based ecological system. They play important roles in water collection, water conservation and in decision making for agriculture which makes them critical actors for maintaining environmentally adaptive practices. Women also pass on this knowledge to younger family members, ensuring the continuity of cultural practices and traditions in the process.

Documentation and recognition of such indigenous knowledge systems is thus necessary for a number of reasons. It helps in the conservation of the cultural heritage of Kisan, protecting the practices that have been developed over the years as a result of their

interaction with the natural environment. In the second sense, it offers valuable inputs to modern debates on water governance, especially in settings where formal approaches are less likely to reflect local knowledge and experience. Finally, it underscores the need for community-based strategies for resilience grounded in lived experience and cultural practices. Finally, it is important to recognize that the Benja marriage negotiation system is not just a social institution, but also an ecological process with a role to play in sustaining the social system. The inclusion of women in this system expands the knowledge of indigenous knowledge systems and their importance in tackling current environmental issues.

Declaration by Authors

Acknowledgement: None

Source of Funding: None

Conflict of Interest: No conflicts of interest declared.

Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0

This is an open-access article published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

REFERENCES

1. Agarwal, B. (1992). The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India.

- Feminist Studies, 18(1), 119-158. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178217>
2. Berkes, F. (2018). Sacred Ecology (4th ed.). Routledge.
3. Beteille, A. (1998). The Idea of Indigenous People. Current Anthropology, 39(2), 187-192. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1086/204717>
4. Levi-Strauss. (1969). The Elementary Structure of Kinship. Boston: Beacon Press.
5. Munda, R. D. (2003). The Jharkhand Movement. Indigenous Peoples Struggle for Autonomy in India, 108.
6. Murdock, G. (1949). Social Structure. London: Macmillan Limited.
7. Scarborough, V. (1996). The Cultural Dimension of Development: Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Intermediate Technology Publications, 32(4), 497-499. doi: 10.1017/S0014479700001551
8. UNESCO. (2017). Indigenous Knowledge and Water Management. Paris: UNESCO.
9. Warren, D. M. (1991). Indigenous knowledge in agricultural development (English). Washington, DC: World Bank. Retrieved from <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/408731468740976906>

How to cite this article: Bharati Kujur, Babita Das. Marriage (Benja) negotiations among kisan tribes: women as custodians of indigenous water management knowledge in matrimonial exchange. *International Journal of Research and Review*. 2026; 13(9): 470-475. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20260945>
