A Note on Cross-Cousin Marriage among Andhra Brahmins

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THE phenomena of cross-cousin marriage has been one of the most polemical themes in anthropological literature. Varied have been the hypotheses advocated to explain its existence in a society. These range from solidarity (Lévi Strauss 1949) to those involving sentiments (Homans and Schneider 1955, Titiev 1956, Hsu 1945) down to structural (Needham 1962). Coult (1962) has in his jural authority hypothesis disagreed with Needham (1962) at the same time not wholly satisfied with the explanations of Homans and Schneider (1955) or Lévi Strauss (1949). Coupled with all these hypotheses are also social and economic motivations forwarded to countenance cross-cousin marriage in societies. A study of the matrilateral form of cross-cousin marriage alone in a group of Andhra Brahmins reveals that most of these explanations can be used to validate its existence. Data for this study have been collected from various parts of Andhra from the Vaidiki Brahmin families.

The Andhra or Telugu speaking Brahmins of South India are broadly divided into a number of Sakhas (sects). These Sakhas are again split up into a number of upsakhas (sub-sects). The sakhas and upsakhas are strictly endogamous. Some of the sakhas of the Telugu Brahmins are Vaidiki, Niyogi, Mardhawa etc. The chart below gives a clearer picture of how these Brahmins are grouped. In this note only the Vaidiki Brahmins are considered and their pattern of cross-cousin mating discussed.

Brahmins (Kula or regional caste)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sakha or Sect</th>
<th>Vaidiki</th>
<th>Niyogi</th>
<th>Vaishnavites</th>
<th>Mardhawa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upsakha or subsect</td>
<td>Velanadi</td>
<td>Veginadi</td>
<td>Murukunadi</td>
<td>Teleganadi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gotras</td>
<td>Kaushika</td>
<td>Gautami</td>
<td>Kaundinya</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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(Fig. 1)
The Vaidiki Brahmins were traditionally the Sakha most intimately connected with priestly activities i.e. ritual performance during births, marriages, deaths and other allied religious functions. The Vaidikis are also classed as Smarthas. They are followers of the Advaita philosophy or monism and can be equated with the Tamil-speaking Smartha Brahmins acknowledging Siva as the higher deity whose manifestation is Vishnu (Gough 1955:822)... The Vaidikis are distributed all over Andhra Pradesh. They reckon descent unilaterally being patrilineal and patrilocal. The inheritance of property is generally to the agnatic heirs, and women do not inherit property unless so desired by the parents. A marriage alliance is arranged by the parents of the boy and girl and very rarely is the mate chosen from a different upsaka or sakha i.e. a Vaidiki Velanadi will marry a Vaidiki Velanadi and not a Vaidiki Murukunadi or Vaidiki Veginadi. Due to this marrying in a closed group which is not big it is possible to trace affinal links between different members of the upsakha.

The preferential form of marriage is matrilateral. According to this preferential form of cross-cousin marriage, a boy’s intended spouse is his mother’s brother’s daughter (MBD) and a girl’s her spouse is father’s sister’s son (FZS) (Z stands for sister). It is found that the other form i.e. patrilateral (FZD, MBS) is not preferred and on the whole avoided except under certain circumstances. For instance, if a man’s sister’s husband is dead and if she is finding it difficult to find a suitable mate for her daughter a man might marry his son to his sister’s daughter. Though this form of marriage is not strictly preferred, yet it is accepted in such cases. However, this is allowed only when one of the parents of either the boy or girl is dead. This interesting provision does not seem to have any particular reason, however, though it can be interpreted in the way given below:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Ego} \Delta \\
\text{O} = \Delta \\
\end{array} 
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1 There has been much discussion regarding the usage of the term ‘preferential’ and ‘prescribed’. ‘Prescriptive marriage’ connotes the category or type of person to be married is precisely determined and this marriage is obligatory (Needham 1962:9). Among the Vaidiki Brahmins this is not so. Marriage is neither obligatory nor compulsory hence I would call it preferential. Here I would also like to quote Loffer (1964:224). ‘If Levi Strauss has used ‘prescribed’ his phrase would have been tautological; moreover, we have seen that marriages with a matrilateral cross-cousin are at best preferential. ‘Preferred’ is consistent with the facts and ‘prescribed’ is not.’ Again Schneider (1965:66) : “Can we say that a prescriptive system is one in which ego is obliged to marry a woman whom he is permitted to marry and a preferential system one in which ego is permitted to marry a woman who is prohibited. This seems sheer nonsense.....”

2 This fits with Homans and Schneider’s definition of unilateral cross-cousin marriage (Marriage, Authority and Final Causes 1955:5).

3 Dronamraju’s figures are 16.6 for first cousins and 7.2 for maternal uncles out of the 2,177 marriages investigated. Out of 16.6% over 12% is with MBD and only 4% is FZD.