

Demerits of Exchange Marriages in Sindh

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ‘Demerits of Exchange Marriages in Sindh’ which is indeed one of the burning social issues of Pakistan. The paper begins with introduction and explanation about the phenomenon of Exchange Marriages, followed by its prevalence around the world. Then the paper quotes a few statistics regarding the existence of this social evil in Pakistan and particularly rural Sindh. After that, the causes for the prevalence of Exchange Marriages in Sindh are discussed. The primary causes include: desire for balance of power, economic reasons, illiteracy, and Feudal and Jirga system. Following that, the effects of exchange marriages are discussed which include domestic violence, estrangement, depression and violation of rights. A brief case from interior Sindh is discussed, after which a set of recommendations is proposed. The main recommendations comprise: improving literacy, demolishing feudal and Jirga system, discontinuing practices such as dowry, and strict legislation with enforcement.

Keywords: exchange marriage, watta satta, rural Sindh, woman, bride

Introduction

Marriage is regarded as the embodiment of a contract which can never be made perfect. The conditions and requisites of this contract can perhaps never be completely satisfied. Several conventional societies, known for possessing a weak legal framework for women, consider female virginity to be of utmost value given the belief that marriage leads to a radical shift of power in the man’s favor. Exchange Marriages, locally known as ‘Watta Satta’ in Pakistan, entail the simultaneous wedding of a sister brother pair from two families. Watta Satta is prevalent to a large degree in rural Pakistan, particularly rural

Sindh. More than 30% of all marriages in rural Pakistan are based on Watta Satta. In plain terms, exchange marriage is a give and take practice. Exchange Marriage has much deeper implications than just bride exchange, it gives birth to the phenomenon of joint threat across the marriages and the two households. In the case of a husband abusing his wife in an exchange marriage, he can anticipate vengeance in kind against his sister by his brother-in-law. Over the years, in rural traditional societies, husbands have usually dominated their wives by using force and authority in the form of emotional, physical and mental torture. In exchange marriages, if the husband exercises coercion upon his wife, then the same could be repeated upon his sister by his in-laws. Exchange Marriage is viewed by some as a source of low family violence while it is believed to be a source of intense reciprocal family violence in many other households of Sindh as well as Pakistan.

Exchange Marriage is carried out in numerous conventional societies, in the same way as many traditional societies practise dowry. Though dowry has been debated at various levels by different intellectuals, yet exchange marriage has not been able to gather much attention. The tradition of Exchange Marriage has been rationalized as a reasonable marriage mechanism in situations which involve meager incomes in addition to ineffective legal frameworks. In such an environment, exchange marriage is believed to be the most useful means accessible to the poor in order to prevent domestic violence, estrangement and conflict. The supporters of exchange marriages argue that it helps in establishing a form of reciprocal social pressure, whereby a man is put off from the thought of abusing his wife by the likelihood that such an action would provoke similar or rather more serious retribution upon his sister by his wife's brother. In other words, exchange marriage provides a type of unofficial mechanism to establish peace and protect the rights of the wife through a form of reciprocity. It is considered to be a solution to the issue of superiority between families as it neutralizes power between families by making their levels of authority similar. Though, this neutrality in the equation comes at the cost of the female, which is treated as collateral and no concern is showed towards her choice or interest. This is certainly a dreadful scenario. Over the course of time, the families engaged in

Exchange Marriages find themselves helplessly attached to each other. In the long run, both the families tend to suffer from this tradition, but the ones who suffer the most are the brides that were bartered.

Another rationale provided in support of exchange marriage is that it is a way to restrict the dowry demands and its after effects. However, practical experience suggests that exchange marriage has been the cause of severe domestic violence carried out in reprisal.

Prevalence

Exchange Marriages make up over one third marriages in rural Pakistan. Over half of the exchange marriages in Pakistan take place in the same village. Further, over four fifths of females either reside in the village of their birth or are able to travel to it and get back home within a day. Out of four females in an exchange marriage, three are married to a relative with whom they share blood relation, usually being paternal first-cousins. Out of the remaining, most are wedded to one who is not related to them by blood but shares the same biradari or zaat (caste or clan). The tradition of exchange marriage is also witnessed in the rural culture of Afghanistan too.

Islamic communities in countries such as Mali and Sudan have also been known to practise the tradition of Exchange Marriage. In the local language of Mali and Sudan, this practice of exchange marriage is known as fallen-ni-falen. Rural areas of Yemen have also been reported to practise exchange marriage system.

Sindh

Even in this modern era, the rural areas of the province Sindh are largely under the influence of feudal traditions. The women in Sindh are perceived and treated as mere objects and used in settling old disputes which often results in them getting married to men much older in contrast to them. Females living under a feudal system do not have the liberty to make a choice with regard to their husbands. There have been cases in Sindh, where, in order to escape from giving out property in the form of dowry and to avoid any kind of property transfer; women are married to Holy Quran, which is completely Un-Islamic.

Despite Jirgas in Sindh being declared illegal and unlawful and against the spirit of the constitution by the Sindh High Court, yet these Jirgas, in the form of tribal and feudal courts continue to make decisions regarding the fate of the people particularly women. Watta Satta (Exchange Marriage) is also inflicted upon the poor women through these Jirgas. Unfortunately, despite the court ruling, the federal as well as provincial governments have failed in putting a stop to the age old practice of Jirgas in Sindh.

In Pakistan, Sindh accounts for the highest share of exchange marriages. Exchange Marriages make up 65% of all the marriages that take place in Nawabshah district (Sindh), 49% in Larkana district (Sindh), 47% in Badin district (Sindh) and 42% in Mirpur Khas district (Sindh). These districts of Sindh have been severely dominated by feudal lords over the years and Watta Satta has been a consequence of it. Some districts of Southern Punjab such as Muzaffargarh and Bhakkar are also prone to the practice of Exchange Marriage. Yet, Sindh stands out as the province highly affected by the tradition of Exchange Marriages.

Analysis

As discussed earlier in the paper, Exchange Marriages are one of the traditional pernicious pagan practices prevalent in Rural Pakistan, particularly Sindh. Even in this age of modernity, women in the rural areas of Sindh are suffering from the peril of Exchange Marriages which reduces their worth to mere objects of barter.

Causes for Exchange Marriages in Sindh

The deplorable act of exchange marriages in Sindh has not slowed down over the years despite rulings from court of law. There are a number of causes which appear to be contributing to the prevalence of Exchange Marriages in Sindh. The major causes have been discussed below:

- 1. Desire to Establish Balance of Power** – A major reason for the growth and sustenance of Exchange Marriages in Sindh is the desire of the families involved in marriage to establish equilibrium of power between them. In order to comprehend the desire to establish the balance of power, it is important to study the

motivation of the parents especially fathers who coerce their daughters (and sons too on occasions) into exchange marriages. The parents particularly the father is motivated by the fact that an exchange marriage would guarantee automatic reciprocity which would enable the father to gain control over the wellbeing of his daughter by connecting it unswervingly with the well being of the sister of his son-in-law. In this manner, if the daughter gets maltreated or abused or is rather compelled to go back to her parent's house after a dispute with her husband or in-laws, then a similar reciprocal action would be taken by her parents as well by sending back their son's wife to her parents home in a tit for tat mode. The justification mentioned above for exchange marriages might appear as ancient or primordial but it seems as the forerunner of a contemporary armed forces tactic known as Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), which is believed by military and strategy experts as a very effective tool to deter aggression. In this way, Exchange Marriage creates a balance of power between the two households, which over the years, has been one of the main reasons for the practice of this tradition. A woman from Badin district in Sindh reports that they do exchange marriages as if they give away their daughter without it, she would be maltreated. She goes on to say that they do Watta Satta in order to ensure the security of their daughter .

2. **Economic Reasons** – A second major cause that promotes Exchange Marriages in Sindh relates to Economic reasons. Exchange Marriages are carried out to avoid dowry as both the families get tied to each other and refrain in demanding dowry. The parents in Sindh who are not well off and illiterate as well would be persuaded to pursue with exchange marriages for their children because that would be economically beneficially for them as the other party would not place any costly demands from them with regard to dowry. This was the rationale for the poor families, however, even rich families particularly the feudal lords and tribal chiefs also prefer exchange marriages because that would enable them to maintain their property, possessions, wealth and land tracts with themselves. They would not be required to transfer any kind of property to their daughters. By getting their daughters married

through Watta Satta, the landlords or feudal chiefs can ensure that none of the side demands land or property in legacy for their daughters. Thus, economic reasons play a major role in bringing about exchange marriages as the population residing in rural Sindh is divided into two extremes; on one hand is the poor population which forms the majority while on the other hand are the rich and wealthy feudal lords. In this way, economics turns out to be a crucial factor in connection with exchange marriages in rural Sindh.

3. **Feudal & Jirga System** – Majority of Sindh's population lives in rural areas and the system prevalent in rural Sindh is tribal and feudal. The feudal landlords dominate their areas and their verdict is regarded as the final verdict with respect to different cases which are brought into their jurisdiction. With power and wealth, they manipulate the rules in their areas and play a significant role when it comes to making decisions pertaining to the lives of others. They attempt at establishing justice in cases involving disputes by asking the two parties to get engaged in Watta Satta or other malicious activities such as Karo Kari, etc. Similar to the power of the Feudal landlords is the command of the Jirga System. Jirgas in Sindh have been a very age old practice in which the chiefs of the village gather together and take decision related to the lives of the parties involved. The nature of the decision depends on the type of case. Various cases have witnessed Jirga ruling in favour of an Exchange Marriage between the families involved. The parties involved have no choice but to accept the verdict of the Jirga and act accordingly. Though Jirgas have been declared unconstitutional and illegal by the courts of law in Pakistan, yet their prevalence and dominance in the lives of rural people remains unparalleled. In this way, feudal system and Jirga system existent in the Sindh Province has been one of the foremost causes for the phenomenon of Exchange Marriages.
4. **Illiteracy** – Illiteracy is a cause for numerous perils. It leads to poverty, crime, injustice and various other undesirable occurrences and trends. Likewise, illiteracy has been a precursor for the pervasiveness of the Exchange Marriage tradition in rural Sindh. Literacy rate in rural Sindh is as low as 36% as compared to 70%

in Urban Sindh. Literacy rate drops to a further low of 17% for females in Rural Sindh . With limited or no access, traditional social norms and pitiable quality of educational services, teachers and physical infrastructure; illiteracy continues to remain one of the chief features of rural Sindh. With lack of education, people in rural Sindh tend to believe that the customs and traditions that they have been following over the years are right and consequently, they do not like to experience any change in the established patterns of their lives. In a similar manner, Exchange Marriages have also assumed the position of a conventionally strong custom. People hesitate in resisting against this established tradition; instead they accept it even if it goes against their will. In fact, it has been proved through research that illiterate fathers possessing land in excess of 12.5 acres are more certain to get their children married through Watta Satta. Conversely, fathers who are literate and who are in possession of less than 12.5 acres of land are less certain of getting their children married through Watta Satta, thus again, highlighting the significance of education and literacy with reference to Exchange Marriages.

5. **Other Reasons** – There are a variety of other reasons as well that contribute towards Exchange Marriages in Sindh. For instance, there might be a situation in which a family might want to make use of their daughter as an inducement to secure a wife for their son, who otherwise might not be fit for wedding. Another noteworthy element related to Exchange Marriages is the demographic structure of the family. Exchange Marriages are more prevalent in families where bachelor brothers are somewhat old aged. Those females who get wedded through Exchange Marriages tend to have more brothers in comparison to other females. Likewise, women involved in Exchange Marriages have less number of sisters in contrast to others.

Effects of Exchange Marriages

1. **Domestic Violence** – One of the primary consequences of Exchange Marriages is the domestic violence carried out on the brides. If one bride is mistreated by her husband, then the husband's sister is mistreated in retaliation by his wife's brother.

According to study, 20% of the women involved in exchange marriages have been a victim of physical abuse by their husbands. The modes of physical abuse include: slapping, hitting, pushing, kicking, choking, throwing, burning and attacking with a weapon. Domestic violence is believed to be a less expressive gauge of wedding conflict than separation. This is because physical abuse can be exhibited by husbands in a state of intoxication as well, regardless of conflict. There have been numerous reported cases of exchanged brides suffering from domestic violence inflicted upon them by their respective in-laws. If one party abuses their daughter-in-law, then in revenge, the other party abuses their daughter-in-law in a more severe manner. A woman from Mirpur Khas district (Sindh) admits that her marriage was based on Watta Satta. She says that when her husband physically abuses her, she goes to her parents' home and informs her mother and sister about it. When her brother learns about it, he naturally feels the rage and in retaliation, physically abuses his wife. She also agrees that because of this, there are numerous fights in her family. She feels that in both the families, victims are none other than women.

2. **Estrangement** – A possible effect of Exchange Marriages in Rural Pakistan is separation or estrangement in which the brides are sent to their parents' home due to a conflict. As discussed earlier in the paper, majority of brides in Exchange Marriages reside geographically close to their parents houses. Estrangement is the strongest indicator of a marital rift. If the wife voluntarily decides to leave her husband's home, then such a decision requires immense amount of mental thought and consideration because the bride knows that its consequences can be far reaching. In an exchange marriage, if a bride leaves her husband's house and goes to her parents house, then it would alarm her parents, who in agony and vengeance, without much contemplation, would immediately send their son's wife to her parents home to convey a strong message to their in-laws. A woman from Mirpur Khas district (Sindh) says that occasionally, she thought of returning to her parents but she did not want to worry them. When her in-laws squabble with her and verbally abuse her, she thinks that she would not tell that to her parents. She adds that though some women

gather the courage to go back to their parents, however, sooner or later, they are required to return to their in-laws otherwise they would have to face rather ruthless mocking from villagers which is indeed derogatory for a woman .

3. **Depression** – Another disastrous consequence resulting from Exchange Marriage is depression. In an exchange marriage, brides often suffer from depression as they are forced to marry against their will which becomes a great source of mental stress for them. In fact, if the woman in Exchange Marriage suffers from major depression (MD), then it is believed to be a strong indicator of marital dispute. In the study carried out by , 23% women experienced major depression. The consequence of major depression is a reflection of the collective effect of all kinds of abuse imposed upon the bride, including physical as well as emotional. Exchange Marriage is a stern test for the brides as marriage is enforced upon them and the fact that it is a lifetime deal; women have no choice but to abide by it. This requires enormous patience, emotional stability and mental strength as they are coerced to adjust in a completely alien environment against their will. Brides also know that they need to quietly, without any complaints, accept their fate in order to keep up their family's reputation. Such kind of a life can be psychologically taxing and can severely affect the woman, leading to mental disorders or major depressions .
4. **Violation of Rights** – Exchange Marriages violate the rights of all those who are forced to marry, against their will, including the bride and the bridegrooms. Every human being in this world possesses a free will and has the right to choose his or her life partner. Coercively forcing a daughter or son to marry against her or his will is indeed a violation of the human rights .

Cases

There have been several cases reported with regard to Exchange Marriages in Sindh, one of which has been briefly discussed below.

Case 1: Ms Hafeeza, aged 31 got married with Muhammad Panah Chandio in the year 2000 through the system of Watta Satta. Chandio, father of the groom clearly declined from marrying his daughter with

the brother of his son's wife. This led to a major conflict between the two families. Later on, Hafeeza went on to give birth to two sons and two daughters. In the year 2013, the daughters were of the age of three and four years. Once the fourth child was born, the husband, Panah Chandio began to look for a second wife in exchange for his two daughters. Chandio finally managed to find Hazoor Magsi, aged 55, who was willing to marry his daughter with him. Meanwhile, Chandio used to regularly physically abuse Hafeeza, who along with her children decided to escape her husband's house and find refuge in her father's house in Shahdad Kot. Ever since then, it has been more than 18 months and Hafeeza is continuously hiding at different places. While Hafeeza was away from Chandio, he married Magsi's daughter in exchange for two minor daughters and an amount of Rs. 2,50,000. As time passed on, Magsi began to ask for the two girls. In order to fulfil his commitment, Chandio took help from the police of Shahdad Kot to compel Hafeeza to surrender her two daughters. In January 2013, Chandio made a plan to attack Hafeeza's father's house and take away the two daughters. He managed to carry out this attack with the help of armed people as well as policemen. Luckily for Hafeeza, she was not taking shelter at her father's house; instead she was in hiding at her brother's house. In this way, the poor minor daughters got away from being kidnapped. When Hafeeza's family proceeded to the Shahdad Kot police station to file an FIR against Chandio, the police refused to do so as the SHO of the police station was a friend of the perpetrator. Chandio, is known for his hideous criminal acts in Interior Sindh but always manages to escape law with the help of police.

In this way, this case was a unique example of Watta Satta where the father (Chandio) in order to marry a second wife was prepared to trade off his two minor daughters. Though he has not been successful in his endeavour up till now, however this case reflects that there are other dimensions attached with Watta Satta as well. It is not just about two brother sister pairs being involved in a give take scenario. In fact, in order to achieve their gruesome motives, notorious people such as Chandio in Sindh are even willing to give their daughters in exchange for a second wife, which seems to be the height of illiteracy and derision.

Recommendations

The custom of Exchange Marriages in rural Pakistan and particularly rural Sindh is a colossal social evil that is defaming the image of Sindh and Pakistan at an international level. Such a tradition of illiteracy and absurdity seems to be stunting the growth of thought, attitude and culture in rural areas of Sindh. With increasing number of Watta Satta cases being reported on a continuous basis, the reputation of Pakistan is being globally tarnished. The tradition of Exchange Marriages needs to be discontinued at the earliest. Some of the steps that can prove to be useful in bringing an end to the ancient custom of Exchange Marriages are discussed below:

- 1. Improving Literacy** – Over the years, low levels of literacy have hampered Pakistan's growth as a nation, in more than one way. As mentioned earlier in the paper, illiteracy in rural areas of Sindh is a major cause for the sustenance of age old pernicious traditions such as Exchange Marriages. Improvement in educational services will lead to higher rate of literacy, which will in turn lead to a higher level of conscience among people, enabling them to distinguish between right and wrong. Once majority of the people in rural Sindh gain the ability to differentiate between good and bad; then over the course of time, ancient pagan practices of Exchange Marriages will automatically come to an end.

To improve literacy in rural Sindh, the role of provincial government becomes extremely crucial. As discussed earlier, literacy rate is as low as 36% in rural Sindh. This is an alarming situation for the provincial government. It needs to react immediately to this crisis by enhancing the spending on the education sector, improving the facilities with respect to physical infrastructure, faculty, educational services and quality of the educational content. Further, it is the responsibility of the parents as well to change their attitudes and start sending their children to schools to make sure that they receive at least receive primary education. Consequently, better education can lead to a better society where the awareness and conscience levels of people are high, thus making them capable of thinking and deciding

rationally, rather than following rituals and customs in a blindfolded manner.

2. **Demolishing Feudal and Jirga System** – The Feudal System along with Jirga System flourishes in rural Sindh. The decisions of the Jirga and Feudal landlords are regarded as final and no one dares to challenge them. The poor illiterate people without any resentment agree to mould their lives according to the verdict announced in a Jirga, even if the decision requires the two parties to get involved in an Exchange Marriage. Though these Jirgas have been declared unlawful, illegal and against the spirit of the country's constitution in a verdict announced by the Sindh High Court, yet unfortunately, these Jirgas continue to be carried out to solve disputes and conflicts in rural Sindh. More so, these Jirgas have always had the backing of feudal lords, police, elected representatives, politicians as well as bureaucrats, who all collectively ensure that the Jirga System continues to thrive. With Jirga System, crimes do not get recorded which is the prime rationale behind the support, offered by police and local administration.

In such a scenario where Jirga System in Sindh is receiving support from all corners, its up to the local people to revolt against the system. Though it would require much guts to stand up against the politicians, police and feudal lords, yet if the poor people of rural Sindh want to change their destinies, they will have to gather the courage to uproot the system of Jirga and feudal.

3. **Discontinuing Other Rituals such as 'Dowry'** – Poor economic conditions of the people in rural Sindh forces them to get their children married through Watta Satta as it facilitates in avoiding the custom of dowry. Likewise, the rich also favour Exchange Marriages because it enables them to refrain from transferring property to their daughters. In this way, the custom of Exchange Marriage in rural Sindh emanates from other age old customs such as dowry. In order to escape from one custom, people get engaged in another custom. In other words, to avoid dowry and property transfer, people give preference to Exchange Marriages, which is

indeed a disappointing situation. There is a strong need to come out of the ancient pagan practices. This is only possible when rural people begin to realize the idiocy of practices such as dowry and watta satta. If the practice of dowry is brought to an end, then there are good chances that the practice of Exchange Marriages will also decline to a certain extent.

- 4. Legislation and Law Enforcement** – Currently, there is no specific legislation against Watta Satta in the constitution. Gaps in legislation in this regard coupled with weak implementation of existing laws result in continuing prevalence of Exchange Marriages in rural Pakistan. It is the need of the hour to frame precise and strong legislation against the custom of Exchange Marriages in order to eradicate this social menace from the rural society of Sindh. The law ministry of the province of Sindh needs to step up in conjunction with the federal law ministry to devise austere laws to eliminate the practice of Exchange Marriages. However, framing of the legislation does not solve the problem; it needs to be followed with strict law enforcement carried out by the local police and civil administration in rural Sindh to ensure that the practice of Exchange Marriages is wiped out. However, this requires strong will and action from the government as well as the law enforcement authorities.

Conclusion

Exchange Marriage (Watta Satta) is a social evil which has been prevalent in rural Pakistan particularly rural Sindh over the years. It is a blemish on the country's image. It involves exchange of brides between two families with the primary purpose of establishing a balance of power between the two families. More than 30% of all marriages in rural Pakistan are based on Watta Satta which highlights the pervasiveness of this age old tradition. Rural Sindh has been a breeding ground of this social evil over the years. The districts of Nawabshah, Larkana, Badin and Mirpur Khas in Sindh have been particularly prone to this menace. There are various factors which contribute to the sustenance of Exchange Marriages even in this modern era. These factors include the desire of families to establish

equilibrium with regard to power, illiteracy and absence of conscience, economic reasons, and longstanding feudal and tribal culture alongside Jirga System. The consequences of Exchange Marriages are far reaching. It leads to estrangement, domestic violence (physical and emotional abuse), depression as well as gross violation of rights. Some of the measures recommended in this paper to overcome the peril of Exchange Marriages include: improving literacy rate, demolishing feudal and Jirga System, discontinuing other rituals such as 'dowry' and strict legislation and law enforcement.

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