

From Ritual Exchange to Taxed Commodity: GST and the Monetization of Bride Price

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Abstract

In 2017, the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) marked a significant restructuring of India's indirect tax regime, based on the principle of "One Nation, One Tax". GST has been widely discussed in terms of macroeconomic efficiency, market restructuring, etc., but its implications for socio-cultural aspects, particularly within indigenous and tribal societies, remain underexplored. In many tribal communities of Northeast India, particularly within the Singpho community, bride price is not merely a financial transaction but a ritual exchange embedded within kinship, social protection, and reciprocity. Bride price among the Singphos has traditionally included livestock, ornaments, oxen, buffalo, and other culturally significant products, many of which are being purchased through official markets rather than subsistence farming. With the introduction of GST, these things join a uniform tax framework, increasing their market value and hastening their transformation from ceremonial objects to taxable commodities. The study investigates how GST, as a tax reform, indirectly alters traditional marriage economies by facilitating the monetization and commercialization of bride-price systems. It also posits that this transformation leads to the progressive monetary conversion of bride price, shifting from a system based on symbolic exchanges to one that demands cash. For tribal households facing economic hardships, rising marriage costs may lead to borrowing, delayed marriages, cutbacks in ritual elements, or alterations in customary practices.

Keywords: Bride price, GST, Monetization, Marriage, Commodities.

1. Introduction:

In 2017, the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) marked a significant restructuring of India's indirect tax regime, based on the principle of "One Nation, One Tax". GST has been widely discussed in terms of macroeconomic efficiency, market restructuring, etc., but its implications for socio-cultural aspects, particularly within indigenous and tribal societies, remain underexplored. In many tribal communities of Northeast India, particularly within the Singpho community, the practice of bride price, within the Singphos popularly known as 'fu' in their local language, is not merely a financial transaction for them, but they regard it as a ceremonial practice that undergoes the respect and value attributed to the bride and her family. This practice of payment symbolises the honour we pay to women in our community and their families for making them so capable and reaching the age of marriage. It is a ritual exchange embedded within kinship, social protection, and reciprocity. It represents inter-clan ties, pays for the transfer of women's productive and reproductive labor, and serves as a traditional kind of social security for the bride's natal family.

The customary practice of *fu* within the Singpho community is a contentious aspect of the cultural imagination of the villages of Ketatong and Bisa Gaon. Its significance and cultural domination continue to raise concerns in anthropology, sociology, and among feminist scholars' writings. While on the field in these villages, it was discovered that the researcher was not only recording a customary institution but also interacting with layers of meaning that went beyond the economic nature of transactions. For them, it is more than just a transaction between two families; it symbolizes social reproduction, cultural recognition, and existential foundation. Bride prices perpetuate gender inequality, commodify women, and exacerbate social hierarchies, according to some academics and practitioners, while others argue that they acknowledge women's place within familial structures, foster kinship reciprocity, and strengthen bonds of respect (Adijei & Mpiani, 2018; Anderson, 2007). Within these academic discussions, the field narratives demonstrate how the lived practices of *fu* in these villages offer distinct understandings of life. However, as goods become increasingly commercialised and market economies expand, traditional marriage exchanges are gradually being monetised even within the Singpho community.

Bride price among the Singphos has traditionally included livestock, ornaments, oxen, buffalo, and other culturally significant products, many of which are being purchased through official markets rather than subsistence farming. With the introduction of GST, these things join a uniform tax framework, increasing their market value and hastening their transformation from ceremonial objects to taxable commodities. The study investigates how GST, as a tax reform, indirectly alters traditional marriage economies by facilitating the monetization and commercialization of bride-price systems. It also posits that this transformation leads to the progressive monetary conversion of bride price, shifting from a system based on symbolic exchanges to one that demands cash. For tribal households facing economic hardships, rising marriage costs may lead to borrowing, delayed marriages, cutbacks in ritual elements, or alterations in customary practices.

2. Theoretical Framework:

Understanding the transformation of bride price, the theoretical framework serves to control, direct, and guide the study of the systems and their transformation of bride price. It requires an interdisciplinary approach that draws on anthropology and political economy.

Gifts, according to anthropological exchange studies, are never simply voluntary acts; rather, they establish systems of duty and reciprocity that perpetuate social ties. In his seminal essay *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss stated that gift exchange in traditional societies is based on a moral and social imperative to give, receive, and reciprocate. Mauss believes that gifts have symbolic value and social meaning that go beyond their material worth. Bride payment is used in Singpho marriage traditions as a form of gift exchange rooted in kinship. The exchange of livestock, textiles, jewelry, and ceremonial items is more than just an economic transaction; it also builds a long-term connection between two families or clans. The trade establishes duties that connect the groups together via mutual recognition and reciprocity.

Bride price, as a result, serves as a social mechanism that strengthens collective solidarity and redistributes community resources. Instead of serving as a commercial transaction, it represents respect for the bride's family and respects the transfer of her labor and reproductive capacity to another household. However, as market forces drive the spread of traditional economies, the symbolic value of such transactions may progressively transform. The rising monetization of ritual commodities through processes such as taxes, commercialization, and market dependency has the potential to convert gift-based reciprocity into market-oriented relationships.

Marriage exchanges can be viewed as systems of kinship-group alliance-building from a structural-anthropological standpoint. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, marriage facilitates the creation of social networks among families by facilitating the exchange of wealth and women. According to this theory, the bride price is a symbolic act that formalizes ties between two kin groups rather than just a monetary contribution. According to alliance theory, the number of married women promotes social cohesiveness and guarantees the survival of kinship networks for future generations. As a result, the bride price is incorporated into a larger social system that governs inheritance, marriage, and social standing. These kinship patterns may change when traditional communities come into contact with growing market economies. The symbolic aspect of marital exchanges may be weakened by the growing commercialization of ceremonial commodities, changing their meaning from social connection to business negotiation.

From a political economy perspective, economic structures significantly shape social institutions. The works of Karl Marx highlight how the expansion of market systems leads to the commodification of social relations. Commodification refers to the process through which social practices and cultural values are transformed into market transactions governed by economic exchange. In the context of marriage, commodification may occur when traditional ritual exchanges become increasingly monetized. As communities become more integrated into market economies, items traditionally produced within households, such as textiles, livestock, or ceremonial goods, are replaced by purchased commodities. This transformation is further intensified by fiscal reforms and taxation policies that regulate market transactions. As ritual goods become taxable commodities, the economic burden of marriage exchanges may increase, contributing to the monetization of bride price.

From this framework, the transformation of bride price reflects broader processes of market penetration and economic restructuring, where cultural institutions adapt to changing economic conditions.

3. Statement of the Problem:

The introduction of Goods and Services Tax (GST) has brought about changes to how goods are bought and sold across India. While GST chiefly emphasizes improving the economic aspect, it also affects an individual's life on a daily basis, and people may not notice it immediately. Bride prices, which are based on custom, respect, and familial ties, are a significant aspect of marriage in the Singpho society. According to Marcel Mauss, these transactions include more than just money; they also involve upholding social ties. Nowadays, a lot of goods needed in marriage ceremonies must be purchased from the market, and GST raises their cost. As a result, families are gradually switching from giving customary gifts to cash, which is increasing the cost of marriages, particularly for lower-class families. Families may experience financial strain and stress under certain situations. This study attempts to comprehend how a tax system might impact customs and the lives of Singpho people, as there is a dearth of information on how GST is impacting such traditional activities.

4. Objective

To explore the socio-economic impact of GST on traditional marriage practices among the Singphos, with particular focus on the rising monetization of bride price.

5. Methodology

The research is qualitative in its approach, employing a "Story Technique" to understand marriage rituals,

the "Fu" institution, its monetization, and the impact of GST on its custom within the context of the Singpho people of Assam in general. Fieldwork was conducted in Margherita, Tinsukia district, Assam, and primary data were collected from two Singpho villages: Bisa Gaon 1 and Ketatong. Purposive sampling has been used to identify respondents with experiential knowledge of Singpho marriages. The sample size consisted of around 60 respondents. According to the respondents' preferences, in-depth interviews were conducted in either Hindi or Assamese to generate one type of data used for the study. The interview locations were also chosen to make respondents feel more at ease, such as their homes, guesthouses, restaurants, and gathering places near public events. After the respondents gave their consent, the interviews were audio-recorded for approximately 1 to 1.5 hours each. In addition, thorough field notes were taken to document the respondents' behavioral cues, which were crucial for comprehending the highly emotional aspects of the concept of marriage and its economic hardships.

6. Findings and Analysis

Marcel Mauss, in his classic book *The Gift*, writes that the 'exchange and contracts take place in the form of presents; in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily.'¹ He further elaborated that the voluntary character of these total services, which appears free and disinterested, is nevertheless constrained and involves vested interest. Most often, such services have taken the form of gifts, in which the presents generously given are accompanied by polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit, while obligation and economic self-interest hide behind the guise of social niceties. One of the principles that imposes this manifestation on the obligatory forms of exchange is the division of labour in society.

While the bride price is traditionally negotiated between families, the chieftain² may influence the final amount. His knowledge of customs helps ensure that the bride price is fair, reflecting the social standing of both families, while balancing material needs with cultural obligations. The chieftain ensures that the bride price adheres to the community's customary laws, preventing excessive or exploitative demands. By maintaining these standards, he preserves the practice's integrity and prevents discord between clans. Moreover, as a custodian of Singpho traditions, the chieftain helps preserve the cultural significance of the bride price, which is not merely a transaction but a symbolic gesture of respect, commitment, and reciprocity between families.

Like many other ethnic groups in India and Southeast Asia, the Singpho community is a reflection of the intricacies of marriage, kinship, and the related economic exchanges. Even though Singpho culture has historically been associated with customs like bride prices rather than dowries, its growing incorporation into larger regional and national structures indicates that dowry practices still have an impact on their marriage rites. The bride-price system, which is strongly established in Singpho culture, serves more than merely as an economic transaction. It emphasizes the community's value for the bride's autonomy and her crucial role in preserving family unity. The bride price emphasizes the woman's worth in her community, in contrast to the dowry system, prevalent in many regions of India, which transfers income from the bride's family to the groom's. However, ancient rituals like bride prices have been influenced by alternative systems, such as dowries, as the Singpho community increasingly interacts with neighboring cultures,

¹ (Mauss, 1967)

² The Singpho are an indigenous tribe living in the North-eastern Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, as well as in parts of Myanmar and China. Their chieftainship is a traditional system of leadership that plays a significant role in their society, specifically in the governance, social organisation, and cultural identity of the Singpho community.

contemporary socioeconomic systems, and prevailing national norms. Economic modernity, cross-cultural exchanges, and changing social dynamics have led to the incorporation or modification of dowry-like customs over time. This analysis explores why the Singpho community is not an exception to the dowry system and situates it within broader sociocultural and economic contexts.

The Singpho community's marriage customs now include dowry-like components as a result of their growing exposure to mainstream Indian societal norms, economic shifts, and ambitions for upward mobility. The researcher has significant questions about the changing identity of the Singpho community due to the convergence of traditional practices and external influences. These include: what socio-economic, cultural, and external factors have facilitated this shift? What does this mean for the community's gender dynamics, social fabric, and cultural preservation? Why is the dowry system, which has historically not existed in Singpho society, emerging?

Dowries were once given out of love. According to Brahmanical beliefs, it was appropriate to give gifts to a young, virgin girl. These gifts were also offered to the young couple out of care and devotion. These gifts are advantageous to the couple because they also help them start a new residence. Therefore, at the time, this type of marriage was officially acknowledged. But it has changed since then. Why is it today such a source of fear for people or brides' families? The groom's family has been making demands since the nineteenth century, but most people are not aware of them. The bride's parents are supposed to comply with the groom's family's demands, which come one after the other.

These cultures have adopted the new practice of sending the bride with articles as part of the dowry. These new trends are also observed among Singphos of Assam. Not many responders were particularly explicit about it. They claim that since people have started providing dowries with their daughters, dowries have started to appear in their society. It didn't exist until a few decades ago, but as society has evolved, people have begun to give their daughters dowries. Consequently, it is accurate to state that these societies are likewise altering their marriage customs.

Dowry was never a custom in our Singpho marriage system. Now, people are adapting things from different neighboring communities. People are now marrying daughters or girls from Assamese communities, where this ritual of giving dowry is prevalent. So it's become popular in our community too. A social servant, Nirula Singpho, responded.

Earlier in our community, people with a sound and rich background used to give away dowry, but it was never ever mandatory. If the parents want to give dowry or articles to their daughters, they do that, and if they do not want to, then nobody demands. But now people with different strata in the community give dowries to their daughters. Now, in eloped marriages, dowry is also given to the daughter. On the day of the main marriage ritual, after the elopement, the dowry is provided by the bride's family to the groom. In arranged marriages, the articles are sent with the bride, like a bed, furniture, a wardrobe, utensils, and others. But in this present-day scenario, not only are the mentioned articles given, but along with these, luxurious items are also provided. It is said by the bride's father that my daughter cannot stay without using a washing machine, a geyser, a refrigerator, and other electronic goods. For these reasons, the demand for dowry is reaching a height.

A Singpho Kotoki has narrated his thoughts

Additionally, poor families that are unable to provide for their girls make a concerted effort to send a significant number of things along with their daughters. They aim to send such articles with these items since they believe that furniture is necessary. Otherwise, prior to the dowry system, poor families would merely send the things that were required.

Over time, bride price practices have undergone transformation due to modernisation, monetisation, and market integration. Anthropological studies show that items traditionally exchanged in kind are increasingly replaced by cash payments, and these demands range from the most modest to the most lavish and costly items. It must include everything from the bride's home. Gifts must be given to all family members, and they must be of high quality. The primary dowry consists of cash, jewelry, furniture, a television, a car, a motorcycle, and other goods.

Even though the Singphos are frequently seen as having unique practices, their slow assimilation into broader social structures shows that they are not impervious to the demands and effects of prevailing cultural systems. A broader trend of cultural adaptation, influenced by economic development, community contacts, and changing ambitions, is evident in the increasing inclusion of dowry-like customs in their marriage ceremonies. Examining the several elements that contribute to this change, investigating the interaction between conventional values and outside pressures, and assessing the consequences for Singpho society are all crucial to comprehending this phenomenon (Jimo, 2018).

This transition reflects the broader penetration of market economies into indigenous communities. As traditional subsistence systems decline and dependence on market commodities increases, marriage exchanges become increasingly monetized. Moreover, the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax has further intensified the process of monetization. GST is a consumption-based tax that applies to a wide range of goods and services used in everyday transactions. When goods commonly exchanged in marriage rituals, such as textiles, jewelry, livestock products, and ceremonial items, are purchased from markets, they become subject to taxation.

This process produces several social consequences, such as

1. Rising marriage costs
2. Shift from ritual exchange to cash payment
3. Economic pressure on vulnerable households
4. Transformation of cultural practices

Analysis

The monetization of bride price raises complex questions regarding gender relations. In Singpho society, bride price symbolically acknowledges women's labour and reproductive contribution to the household. However, increasing financial valuation of marriage exchanges can also risk commodifying women within kinship negotiations.

Anthropological scholars argue that the intersection of market forces and traditional institutions often produces contradictory outcomes, simultaneously recognising women's value while reinforcing economic inequalities. However, the findings suggest that increased reliance on market goods has gradually altered the nature of these exchanges. Items once produced within households or obtained through subsistence economies are increasingly purchased from commercial markets. As these goods fall within the taxable domain of GST, their prices rise, leading families to substitute ritual goods with cash payments. This shift indicates a transition from a gift-based system of reciprocity to a monetized form of exchange, where the symbolic value of ritual goods is partially replaced by economic valuation.

While the implementation of GST primarily aims to streamline taxation and improve economic efficiency, its indirect effects reveal how economic policies can reshape traditional cultural illustrates the broader influence of modern economic structures on indigenous social institutions.

Conclusion

The examination of bride prices in light of current budgetary reforms shows how closely cultural institutions are linked to larger economic systems. In Singpho society, bride prices have historically served as a symbolic means of exchange that strengthened communal cohesion, reciprocity, and kinship ties. Instead of being solely commercial transactions, these exchanges were integrated into systems of social obligation, drawing on Marcel Mauss's concepts. However, the material conditions under which these trades take place have changed significantly due to the growth of market economies and the implementation of fiscal policies such as the Goods and Services Tax. Traditional marital exchanges are gradually shifting toward commercial transactions as ceremonial commodities increasingly enter formal markets and are subject to taxation. Karl Marx's descriptions of broader commodification processes, in which social interactions are mediated through economic transactions, are reflected in this development. The shifting connotations of bride price also illustrate how societies reinterpret traditional customs in light of changing socioeconomic circumstances.

In the end, the study emphasizes that although GST seeks to establish a cohesive and effective tax system, its indirect effects reveal the intricate ways in which macroeconomic policies can shape gender relations, indigenous kinship structures, and the financial circumstances of marginalized households.

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