

## INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

# Bringing and Being a ‘Kaim-bride’: A Note on Marriage and Migration in Assam Chars

Sampurna Das\*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“I wanted a bride from the *kaim* [inland area] and got one. There are benefits of having a kaim-bride—unlike local women, they are healthy—not anaemic—and educated,” said Zahidul. Zahidul is the son of the *char* headman (locally called *matbor*) and my host. Chars are low-lying river sandbars peculiar to the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin in eastern India (states of Assam and West Bengal) and Bangladesh. They are formations made of silt sediments, which accumulate and disintegrate every year, subjecting their inhabitants to a repetitious cycle of losing and gaining land. In Assam, chars cover around 5% of the total area of the state, housing 10% of the total population of Assam, and are spread across 14 districts, 59 development blocks, and 2,251 villages (GOA 2004). Assam chars are home to the Miya or the “Bengali Muslim”<sup>1</sup> ethnic minority. Kaims are the inland areas that are away from the river. Kaim-brides, therefore, refer to women born and raised in the inland areas and married into chars.

In the Osthir char (name changed on request of my participants) of western Assam’s Barpeta region—where I was based in 2019–2021 for 15 months during my doctoral fieldwork—one-fourth of the women are kaim-brides originating from neighbouring rural areas. This note adds to the wider literature analysing the phenomenon of cross-regional marriage migration in

---

\* PhD candidate. Department of Sociology. Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi. [sampurnasoc@gmail.com](mailto:sampurnasoc@gmail.com)

Copyright © Das 2023. Released under Creative Commons Attribution © NonCommercial 4.0 International licence (CC BY-NC 4.0) by the author.

Published by Indian Society for Ecological Economics (INSEE), c/o Institute of Economic Growth, University Enclave, North Campus, Delhi 110007.

ISSN: 2581–6152 (print); 2581–6101 (web).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37773/ees.v6i2.1035>

<sup>1</sup> From here onwards, I shall refer to the community as Miya. While “Bengali Muslims” is the official nomenclature of the community, it is critically received, as the nomenclature has colonial and racial roots. Moreover, this label flattens out the rich history of the Miya community in Assam (Dutta, Azad, and Hussain 2021).

India (Kaur 2004; Palriwala and Uberoi 2008; Blanchet, 2008; Mazumdar *et al* 2013; Ibrahim 2018) to highlight that kaim–char marriage is a unique cross-regional marriage mediated by norms of social status, conjugality, and gender relations in a uniquely uncertain riverine ecology.

In this note, I will examine the structure and process of kaim–char marriages: why do men bring brides from the kaim? Why does a kaim-bride migrate to the char? Is it only men of particular class groups and economic status who partake in this practice? What kinds of marriage payments and economy are associated with such marriages? How are migrant women received in char society and households? Given the ecological and cultural differences between the natal kaim and marital char home, what kinds of negotiation and agency are shown by these women? To explore these concerns, I draw upon my interviews with the kaim-brides, the husbands and their families, the parents of the kaim-brides, and local women, who I thought may be able to reflect on the kaim–char marriages in Osthir char. In the course of my research, I also surveyed landed men to get an estimate of the frequency of marrying kaim-brides.

## **2. BRINGING A KAIM-BRIDE AS A SOCIAL STATUS ENHANCER**

The landed households in Osthir char, which account for less than 20% of the entire char population, can marry a kaim-bride. These households control around 70% of the land in the char. The households of the matbor and his kin are included. Although not every landed family has a kaim-bride, all aspire to this end.

My genealogical analysis suggests that the generational frequency of kaim-brides is on the rise. Interviews with the husbands of kaim-brides revealed that their preference for kaim-brides is linked to the growing awareness and adoption of family planning measures, following the launch of the ASHA (or accredited social health activist) programme in the char in 2010. Initiated by the National Rural Health Mission, the ASHA programme brought a new idea of prosperity to the chars—of having fewer children, since the dense population of the chars is widely stigmatised. Thus, for the landed men, having fewer children became a sign of higher social status. This became what distinguished them from non-landed poorer families in the chars, who need more children as extra hands to cope with cyclical erosion and accretion.

As per local beliefs, the way to have lesser children is to have a kaim-bride. Zahidul reasoned that the local women are anaemic and bear weak children. As a result, more children are needed as replacements for children who are sick or may die. On the contrary, kaim-brides are known to be healthier, beget healthier offspring with higher survival chances, and, consequently, need to

have fewer children. The “child survival hypothesis” makes kaim-brides preferable. Secondly, it is easier for educated women to adopt family planning practices, hence increasing the demand for kaim-brides, who also tend to be educated. I was told by Zahidul that community workers talk to the women about various contraceptive measures, but because most char women are illiterate, they are not able to understand and subsequently practise family planning measures. Thus, for family planning, an educated wife is required, which is more likely if they belong to the kaim. In this manner, the burden of family planning is conveniently placed on women. Zahidul further explained that local women remain uneducated as because of the flood and erosion,

the only primary school in the char remains closed for months during and after floods...this disrupts the education of children in the char, especially girls because the boys may be sent to the kaim for education, which is unheard of for girls, and thereby most local women in chars remain illiterate.

### 3. BEING A KAIM-BRIDE AND THE MARRIAGE ECONOMY

I was informed by Akila, Zahidul’s wife, that poverty and bride-price are the primary reasons kaim-brides marry into the char. Kaim-brides belong to poorer Miya families from the inland and only agree to marry into chars for better economic prospects. More often than not, kaim-brides are unable to compete in the local marriage market due to their economic status and are forced to look towards the char. Their natal families make sure that an alliance is fixed with landed families, as life in a char is physically laborious and characterized by the constant shifting of homesteads driven by erosion and accretion—they do not want their daughters to perform hard labour without any economic benefits. The practical hardships of living in an uncertain char ecology underline that only men who have an established economic base in the region can take a kaim-bride.

The element of bride-price (locally known as *mahr*) further characterizes the economics behind the kaim-char marriage. Bride-price refers to the payment made by the groom’s family to the bride’s family in the form of money, livestock, or other valuables. As opposed to the system of dowry—a common form of marriage payment in Assam, and India at large—the Miya community of Assam practices bride-price. Miller (1981) and Agrawal (2014) emphasize that bride-price is prevalent only among marginalized communities, particularly low-ranking castes and tribal groups in India.

Over the years, the bride-price for kaim-brides has risen. Akila said that Zahidul had to pay a hefty sum to fix their alliance. Zahidul confirmed “the expensiveness” of his wife by narrating that the bride-price of 1,00,000

rupees was double what he had estimated. Akila further explained the lucrateness of a char alliance by enumerating the cost of a local wedding:

If my father were to fix an alliance for me within the kaim, it would have resulted in a significant loss of the family's resources, as the alliance would have been from a poorer family like us, and we would not get a high bride-price.

The kaim-char alliance is an optimum situation for poor kaim families like Akila's. Juxtaposing her marriage to her sisters, who were married in kaim, Akila highlighted that while her sisters constantly need economic support from the natal family, she does not. Furthermore, since Akila has been married into a prosperous household, she is expected to support her natal house, into the future, be it in the form of money, food, or other valuable commodities.

#### **4. LOCAL BRIDES, KAIM-BRIDES, AND THE INSIDER-OUTSIDER CONUNDRUM**

The local brides—those born and brought up in the chars—regard kaim-brides as frail outsider women. The ones I talked to told me that the kaim-brides are weak and unable to swiftly pack and unpack household items during floods and erosion and prefer to “run away” to their natal kaim family in these situations. It is important to note how the idea of health emerges across this region—local men see kaim-brides as healthy, while the local women see them as frail. Health is a subjective experience, as Castro (1995) points out, based on specific patterns of interaction between individuals. My conversations with local brides further revealed that the kaim-brides were not inclined to learn the culture and history of the Osthir char and did not try to understand the shifting nature—rhythms of erosion and accretion—of the char landscape. For them, like the “outsider” people of the kaim, the kaim-brides see the char as a dangerous and uninhabitable place and wish to leave as soon as there is flood or erosion.

However, the kaim-brides do not remain outsiders. There is a steady change in social status, which is brought about by pregnancy and motherhood, particularly if a kaim-bride bears a son. Motherhood transforms a kaim-bride from an outsider to a relative insider. Childbirth and motherhood are seen as rites of passage for the kaim-bride. This is true for most cultures, especially in South Asia, where motherhood is highly idealized and gives women identifiable social status (Lewis 1958; Mandelbaum 1970; Kakar 1981; Dube 1997).

In January 2021, Akila was in the second trimester of her pregnancy. I observed how her neighbours, who were local brides, had become solicitous

of her welfare, introducing her to midwives and soothsayers. Gestures of acceptance and affection towards Akila suddenly increased markedly. The growing feeling of acceptance was also reinforced by social customs. As a pregnant kaim-bride, Akila was to continue staying in her in-law's home unlike local brides, who may go to their natal home. This is believed to help the kaim-bride strengthen her and her child's relationship with the char—a prerequisite for Akila to be considered a relative insider.

The roots of this relative insider status bestowed on the pregnant kaim-bride lie in a social and cultural belief that equates “woman” with “mother” and suggests that by giving birth to a child of the local man, “the kaim-ness in the kaim-bride dissolves” (“*kaim bepar gulo ghula ja?*”). For the kaim-bride, motherhood is an event through which the char culture confirms her status as a renewer of the family line and grants her respect and consideration, which were not given to her as a mere wife. Nonetheless, the improvement in social status is only partial. The kaim-bride is often reminded of her outsider position from time to time. In Akila's case, her request to see a gynaecologist during an episode of abdomen pain was not considered favourably. The local midwife, who was handling the situation, disappointedly remarked that such requests are never made by local women and are one of the reasons why kaim-brides can never fully become char women.

## 5. NEGOTIATION AND AGENCY WITHIN THE KAIM-CHAR MARRIAGE

Another consequence of pregnancy is a change in the kaim-bride's agency. I observed that kaim-brides who were mothers exerted power, which was not an option available to them before childbirth.

Using their newfound acceptance, these mother kaim-brides often rise to leadership positions in women's cooperative societies. In all the 12 state-run women's cooperative societies in Osthir char, the secretaries and cashiers were kaim-brides. Akila, a secretary herself, explained that as someone who was raised in the kaim and had attained secondary education, she was far more capable of undertaking organizational and planning tasks for official institutions such as the cooperative society than a char woman. Akila underlined how, as a leader of a women's cooperative, she plans the process of resurrecting homesteads affected by erosion. The kaim-brides re-signify these position with characteristics that can only be fulfilled by someone from a kaim.

Further, by agreeing to stay back in the kaim during pregnancy, the kaim-brides engage in personal discussions with their husband. Although a char-based pregnancy is meant to teach them the ways of char life, kaim-brides use it to spend more time with their husbands, conversing with them and

conveying their wants and needs to them. For instance, Akila was able to talk to Zahidul about seeing doctors rather than a midwife and saving money for their child's higher education in the kaim. In a way, the kaim-brides, envision and negotiate an autonomous present and future for themselves in the char. The kaim-brides thus engage in non-ideal gender behaviours—they take charge of work, that too outside the domestic domain, and lay the groundwork to voice their concerns to their husbands, which proves invaluable in making a living in the char.

Further, Akila emphasized that their agency is framed by the networks they forge using mothering roles, with help from senior kaim-bride mothers who pioneered this route. Anchored in these networks, kaim-brides had social capital to imagine alternatives beyond surrendering to the ideals of a docile char woman. Akila narrated how husbands are the main support system for the kaim-brides, as they “allow” them to invest time in organizing the cooperative society and “help” in childcare when they are visiting the kaim for the district-level meetings of women's cooperatives. The kaim-brides' commitment to asserting leadership illustrates that reasoning is a fundamental component of their personhood, embodied in the articulation of their distinctive “social capital” (Bourdieu 1986). In doing so, the kaim-brides enhance the social capital of the husbands and their families, making them desirable to other local men.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This note examines the social situation of the brides who have migrated to the char from the rural inland areas of Assam. It concludes that the reasons driving kaim–char marriages circle around poverty, lucrative marriage payments, and a quest for social status.

The health and education status of the kaim-brides makes them objects of social capital, which can be accessed through the payment of a bride-price. The landed men have economic capital via land control, but they feel that they lack social capital. There is a contradiction between economic wealth and social status in the chars, and access to kaim-brides is an indicator of social status. By marrying kaim-brides, these men transform their economic capital into social capital and strengthen their social status. As for the kaim-brides, they agree to marry into a char only when the alliance is with a landed family which thereby ensures a strong economic status. A kaim-bride never agrees to take a peasant man from the char, who has little or no land control. This also signals the concerns of the natal families of the kaim-brides regarding conditions of ecological vulnerability and the possibility of the woman experiencing a suffering peculiar to the char landscape, which

threatens reproduction and livelihoods on the char. In other words, kaim–char marriages signify an exchange of economic capital for social capital.

Further, despite facing difficulties in adjusting to floods, erosion, and conjugal and gendered norms, the kaim-brides are gradually incorporated into the marital household and char when they become mothers. The kaim-brides reconstruct their gendered selves by articulating their kaim subjectivities, improving communication with their husbands and building fruitful marriages, as well as building networks with other kaim-brides and developing strategies for living in the char. We also see that being a kaim-bride complicates the construction and practise of marital, conjugal, and gender relations in the char.

As shown in the note, much of the explanation of the structure and processes behind kaim–char marriages lies in understanding the complex social relations organising the life of the people in the char and their relation to the ever-shifting char ecology.

**Ethics Statement:** I hereby confirm that this study complies with requirements of ethical approvals from the institutional ethics committee for the conduct of this research.

**Data Availability statement:** The data used to support this research is available in a repository and the hyperlinks and persistent identifiers (e.g. DOI or accession number) are stated in the paper.

**Conflict of Interest Statement:** No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## REFERENCES

- Agrawal, Anuja. 2014. “Situating Marriage Payments: Bride-price and Dowry Among the Bedias of North India.” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 48 (2): 223–247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0069966714525164>.
- Blanchet, Therese. 2008. “Bangladeshi Girls Sold as Wives in North India.” In *Marriage, Migration and Gender*, edited by Rajni Palriwala and Patricia Uberoi, pp. 152–179. New Delhi: Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9788132100324.n6>
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. “The Forms of Capital.” In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J Richardson, pp. 241–258. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Castro, Roberto. 1995. “The Subjective Experience of Health and Illness in Ocuituco: A Case Study.” *Social Science & Medicine* 41 (7): 1005–1021. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536\(94\)00406-J](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(94)00406-J).
- Dube, Leela. 1997. *Women and Kinship: Comparative Perspectives on Gender in South and South-East Asia*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press.

- Dutta, Urmitapa, Abdul Kalam Azad, and Shalim M Hussain. 2021. "Counterstorytelling as Epistemic Justice: Decolonial Community-based Praxis from the Global South." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 69 (1–2): 59–70. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12545>.
- GOA. 2004. *Socio-Economic Survey of Char Areas, 2002–03*. Directorate of Char Development, Ministry of Minority and Social Welfare Government of Assam.
- Ibrahim, Farhana. 2018. "Cross-border Intimacies: Marriage, Migration, and Citizenship in Western India." *Modern Asian Studies* 52.5: 1664-1691. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X16000810>.
- Kakar, Sudhir. 1981. *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. 2nd ed. India: Oxford University Press.
- Kaur, Ravinder. 2004. "Across-region Marriages: Poverty, Female Migration and the Sex Ratio." *Economic and Political Weekly* 39 (25): 2595–2603.
- Lewis, Oscar. 1958. *Village Life in Northern India*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Mandelbaum, David G. 1970. *Society in India: Continuity and Change*. 1st vol. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mazumdar, Indrani, N. Neetha, and Indu Agnihotri. 2013. "Migration and gender in India." *Economic and Political Weekly* 48 (10): 54-64.
- Miller, Barbara D. 1981. *The Endangered Sex: Neglect of Female Children in Rural North India*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Paliwala, Rajni, and Patricia Uberoi. 2008. "Exploring the Links: Gender Issues in Marriage and Migration." In *Marriage, Migration and Gender*, edited by Rajni Paliwala and Patricia Uberoi, pp. 23–60. New Delhi: SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9788132100324.n1>