

Negotiating Ancestral Rites and Modern Realities: Contemporary Shifts in Kutia Kandha Marriage Practices

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Abstract

This ethnographic study explores the dynamics of marriage practices among the Kutia Kandha, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in Odisha, India, with a focus on how ancestral customs are being negotiated within contemporary realities. Employing participatory observation and interviews with cultural custodians such as the *Janni* (priest), *Majhi* (headman), *Kutaka* (shaman), alongside elders and youths, the research identifies four distinctive forms of marriage: negotiation, arranged through reciprocal gift exchange; capture, marked by a symbolic act of abduction; elopement, where couples cohabit prior to formal recognition; and service, in which the groom resides and labours within the bride's household. These practices, deeply embedded in ritual, reciprocity and kinship networks, remain integral to community life but are simultaneously subject to gradual transformation. Pressures of modern education, state intervention, legal frameworks, and aspirations for upward mobility among younger generations are subtly reshaping these institutions. The findings reveal a process of cultural negotiation where the Kutia Kandha seek to safeguard their identity and ritual traditions while adapting to external influences, while reciprocity continues to function as the core organising principle.

Keywords: Custom, Kutia Kandha, Marriage, Ethnography, India

1 Introduction

Marriage among tribal¹ societies, including the Kutia Kandha tribe of Odisha, serves not only as a personal union but as a fundamental cultural and social institution. Tribal marriages are deeply embedded in customs, rituals, and traditions that do more than simply legalize the union between individuals; they fulfil broader social functions such as labour sharing, child-rearing, and the transmission of cultural values across generations (Kumar, 1973; Padhi, 2015; Sabar & Dash, 2023). In Kutia Kandha communities, marriage strengthens family alliances, ensures lineage continuity, and maintains social order. From a patriarchal perspective, as outlined in Notes and Queries, marriage is typically defined as a formal union between a man and a woman, intended to establish a socially recognized relationship. This union legitimizes the children born from the marriage, giving them rightful status within the family and community (Forsyth, 2014; Girgis et al., 2020; Gough, 1959).

As a patriarchal society, the Kutia Kandha, classified as one of India's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups² (PVTGs), practice exogamous marriage in which members are required to seek brides outside

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¹ A "tribe" typically denotes a community whose members share a collective identity shaped by common ancestry, culture, language, and territory. These groups are frequently recognized as "Adivasis" in India.

² Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) are distinct tribal communities in India recognized by the Government of India due to their extreme vulnerability, socio-economic backwardness, declining or stagnant populations, low literacy rates, and dependence on pre-agricultural technology. The earlier term Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) was officially changed to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in 2006 by the Government of India.

of their clan. This rule prohibits individuals from marrying within their own clan or close relatives, such as siblings, cousins, and sometimes even distant kin. Exogamy raises social cohesion and integration within the tribe by encouraging alliances between different clans. Sexual relationships between clan members are treated as taboo (Behera & Rout, 2025; Ota & Sahoo, 2010). Moreover, the Kutia Kandha employ various methods to find brides, including negotiation (marriage fix through offering gifts to the bride's father), capture (kidnapping the bride, often against her will), elopement (where a couple in love lives together before formalizing their marriage), and service (where a groom works for the bride's family for one or two years before marriage). All these marriage practices are conducted with ceremonial approval among the Kutia Kandha of Kandhamal district. While the tribe generally practices monogamy, polygyny (where a man has more than one wife) also occurs, particularly among wealthier men of the tribe who desire more children to help manage their land or property. Remarkably, the wives in such marriages often live cooperatively in a single household. These nuances highlight the unique nature of Kutia Kandha social organization compared to other tribal groups.

This study seeks to examine the diverse marriage practices among the Kutia Kandha tribe through in-depth ethnographic fieldwork. It employs a qualitative research method using participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and detailed case studies. By living within the community, observing rituals firsthand, and engaging in both formal and informal conversations with villagers, the research aims to capture a holistic view of the Kutia Kandha's matrimonial customs. Interviews with tribal elders, village leaders, and married couples shed light on the evolution of marriage practices, the significance of rituals, and the role of kinship networks. The villages selected for the study were chosen not only for their geographical diversity but also for their varying degrees of exposure to external influences such as urbanization, education, and economic development. This approach allowed for a comparative analysis of how these factors have impacted traditional marriage practices, and how the community negotiates between preserving their cultural identity and adapting to modern changes.

2 Kutia Kandha, marriage, and reciprocity

Historically, the Kutia Kandha tribal community of India practices various forms of marriage, such as negotiation, where marriage is fixed through offering gifts to the bride's father; capture or kidnapping of the bride, often against her will; elopement, where the couple in love lives together before formalising their marriage; and service, where the groom works for the bride's family for months or years prior to marriage. A number of scholars have attempted to explain these practices. For instance, marriage by capture has been interpreted as representing an early stage in social evolution, when exogamous groups were hostile towards each other and capturing women was considered a necessary means of securing a wife. McLennan (1865) linked the origin of exogamy and marriage capture to female infanticide. Although many anthropologists have subsequently rejected this explanation, it continues to resonate with certain historical patterns of infanticide reported among the Kutia Kandha (Barnes, 1999). Other scholars have suggested that bride capture was often associated with wealth and status, as it was primarily practised by socially prominent individuals who could afford its higher costs and withstand potential resistance. The bridewealth paid after such capture was typically much higher than in other forms of marriage (Levi-Strauss, 1974; Lubbock, 1870; Wake, 1889). In such cases, capturing a bride was not merely a necessity but also a display of power and prestige, reflecting the strength and social standing of the groom and his family.

Bride service, where the groom works for the bride's family to validate the marriage (Dean, 2018), also plays a significant role in Kutia Kandha society. This practice bears resemblance to matrilineal tendencies, as the groom resides in the bride's village during the period of service. However, patrilineal residence ultimately prevails, as the completion of service enables the groom to take his bride to his own village (Lowie, 1949). In situations where a man is unable to pay bridewealth, bride service serves as an alternative, eventually culminating in marriage and the transfer of the bride to the groom's household. Becker (1974), from an economic perspective, argues that individuals seek partners who maximise their well-being, often reflected in the exchange of household commodities. In many tribal societies, including the Kutia Kandha, the exchange of goods and gifts forms an integral part of marriage practices, reinforcing structured relationships

between families and villages. In marriage through negotiation the families maintain strong kin ties and create financial and social dependency through marriage (Fortes, 1962).

Early scholars of anthropology and sociology studied the concept of marriage and tried to understand its origin while illustrating it in vivid ways. Tylor (1871), for example, argued that all human beings, even those “vastly separated in time and space”, share the same “human nature”, meaning they possess common, genetically rooted instincts. This idea is understood as the “psychic unity of mankind”, going beyond an understanding of marriage as a requirement for the functioning of society. Westermarck (1891) further emphasised that marriage, as a social institution with biological and evolutionary roots, originated from sexual instinct and later became regulated by customary laws. In his view, marriage functions to provide a stable structure for reproduction, child-rearing, and the wider organisation of society, thereby offering economic, social, and other forms of protection. All these views were rooted in evolutionary theory, which was later criticised by many social anthropologists. Malinowski (1934) offered a functionalist but vague explanation that, “the real essence of the marriage act is that by means of an extremely simple or highly complicated ceremony it gives a public, tribally recognized expression to the fact that two individuals enter the state of marriage”.

From the school of symbolism, Turner (1967) highlighted the symbolic tensions in virilocal (patrilocal) marriage, where a woman moves to her husband’s village, creating a distance from her family. Drawing from his study among the Ndembu, this tension arises when a woman’s labour and offspring are transferred to her husband’s village. In the community, a woman’s departure from her kin and the transfer of her labour and potential children to her husband’s village reflects a broader conflict between her kinship obligations and the expectations of virilocal marriage. Kinship control and village prestige are central in marriage processes, especially in capture and negotiation marriages, where the groom’s family compensates the bride’s family with buffaloes, cattle, and wine. The bride’s family seeks to retain control over her labour and children. The understanding of marriage shaped later by structuralists was different. The founder of this school, Levi-Strauss, argued that marriage, understood as part of kinship systems, is constructed by the human mind at an unconscious level. The recurrence of kinship patterns, marriage rules, and prescribed attitudes between relatives across different societies, even those vastly separated in time and space, suggests that observable phenomena in kinship result from general though implicit laws (Levi-Strauss, 1974).

The driving factors upon which kinship builds are rooted in reciprocity which operates at an unconscious structural level within the marriage system (Levi-Strauss, 1974). Reciprocity, expressed as the exchange of gifts³, symbolises “social security, the solicitude arising from reciprocity and cooperation” (Mauss, 2002). These rules are culturally specific expressions of broader structural principles that organise kinship, marriage, and social order (Read, 2026). In this sense, reciprocity is not merely an act of exchange but a fundamental mechanism through which social cohesion is maintained. In other words, marriage is not simply a union between individuals; it rather is a structured exchange between groups. This aligns with the structuralist insight that kinship systems are founded upon the circulation of women as the “supreme gift”, through which alliances are created and maintained. Tribal society is about living with others. This coexistence necessitates reciprocity, which is impossible without alterity: the recognition of the “other”. Society begins when groups acknowledge their dependence on others for survival and reproduction, and it is through the exchange of gifts, including marriage alliances, that this interdependence is institutionalised (Hénaff & Doran, 2013; Hugh-Jones, 2008).

The mythology of the Kutia Kandha tribe provides a crucial framework for understanding their marriage practices and reciprocity. Central to this mythological framework is the figure of Nirantali, revered as the creator of the tribe, whose actions and narratives shape the moral and social expectations surrounding marriage.

The first myth speaks to issues of sexual compatibility, marital harmony, and the balance of power between spouses:

“Nirantali had a daughter and when the child grew up, she found that she had teeth in her

³In tribal society, the reciprocal exchange of gifts symbolises the kinship between two groups within a community, creating or opening a door for the cycle of exchanges which includes economic (goods), social (relations), political (alliances), religious (spirits, rituals), and moral (honour, obligation) exchanges (Mauss, 2002).

vagina. Pijju Bibenj came to marry her, and on the way home desired to lie with her. But when he saw the great teeth like the tusks of elephants, he was frightened and ran away, leaving the girl by the wayside. The girl returned to the mother, and she was so beautiful that she soon found another husband. But when he approached her, she cut off his penis and he died. The story got round and everyone was afraid of the girl. But there was one man with an organ twelve hands long. He married her, and when they came together, she bit off all but a hand's breadth. They both lost consciousness and lay together till the morning. Nirantali wondered why they were so late, and going in saw the teeth in her daughter's thing. She at once broke them off. This revived the couple who henceforward lived happily (Elwin, 1949: 384)."

This myth emphasizes the importance of sexual compatibility and control in marriage. The fear of the daughter's "teeth" symbolizes the potential danger in unregulated sexuality, which disrupts the possibility of stable marital exchange. The repeated failure of marriages in the narrative symbolizes deficient reciprocity where the union does not produce mutual balance between partners. The intervention of Nirantali, who removes the teeth, restores this balance and enables a successful marital relationship. In this sense, marriage is not simply a biological or emotional union but a regulated system where equilibrium between partners and family members must be maintained.

The second myth underscores the foundational role of marriage in establishing kinship ties, social order, and responsibility within the Kutia Kandha society:

"When men were born, they brought with them some siari seeds and went to live in the jungle. They lived like monkeys, jumping from bough to bough and eating their siari seeds. They did not recognize mother or sister: each took his pleasure as he felt inclined. One day Nirantali called the Chief and said, 'How is it you're living in this way, recognizing neither mother nor sister?' The Chief said, 'We live like jungle monkeys. We've no food to give for feasts at weddings and how can we have relatives without weddings?' 'Come,' said Nirantali and took him into the house and gave him rice beet, a pig and a cock and some rice. 'Eat this sort of thing. First go to the jungle; sacrifice and cut your clearings. When you've got the clearing ready, I'll get every kind of seed from the horse and the elephant and send it to you. Sacrifice when you cut and fire and sow and when you marry, then you'll be able to recognize who is your mother and sister. The Chief took these things, he sacrificed them and gave a little to everyone. When they ate, wisdom came to them and they realized this woman was mother, this sister, this wife. After, these men began to eat rice and recognize their relations (Elwin, 1954: 534-535)."

Similarly in this myth, marriage is portrayed as the foundation of societal order and kinship. The transformation from a state of disorder where social distinctions are absent, to an organised society is made possible through acts of giving, sharing, and sacrifice. Nirantali introduces not only agriculture and ritual but also the principle of exchange, where food, animals, and seeds are distributed among the people. In other words, the communal sharing of resources and the obligation to participate in feasts and sacrifices reflect what can be understood as a broader system of exchange, where social bonds are continuously created and maintained. This act of distribution reflects a system of reciprocity, where sharing creates recognition, and recognition establishes kinship. Marriage, in this context, emerges as a key institution through which these reciprocal relations are stabilised (Elwin, 1949, 1954).

3 Ethnic affinity

The Kutia Kandha are a subgroup of the Kandha tribe, one of the three Kandha sub-tribe categories. The other two sub-tribes are Dongaria Kandha and Desia Kandha. Geographically, both Kutia Kandha and Dongaria live in the hills or valley regions of the eastern part of India, both recognized as PVTGs due to their socio-economical position (Rath, 2011). Historically, Kutia Kandha villages were typically uni-clan, but over time many of these settlements have come to include members of multiple clans as well as people from other ethnocultural communities (Ota et al., 2009). In Odisha, they are primarily concentrated in

Table 1: Kutia Kandha population in the study area as per 2011 census

Village	Total population	Population of scheduled caste	Total Kutia Kandha population	Male Kutia Kandha	Female Kutia Kandha
Dupi	268	77	183	72	111
Pakuru	165	50	115	55	60
Kalamguda	175	0	174	79	95
Guma	1181	590	375	217	158
Pedam	131	7	121	64	57

Note. Retrieved from: censusindia.gov.in

Table 2: Sample of households collected during the baseline household survey in the study area

S.L. No.	Village	No. of households	Total Kutia Kandha population	Male Kutia Kandha	Female Kutia Kandha
1	Dupi	20	107	55	52
2	Pakuru	19	115	63	52
3	Kalanguda	21	113	59	54
4	Guma	28	136	71	65
5	Pedam	22	114	61	53
Total		110	585	309	276

the southern regions of the Kandhamal and Kalahandi districts. They are traditionally shifting cultivators who use the Dravidian Kui language. Historically, the Kandha were notorious for practicing Meriah human sacrifices, predominantly in the Ganjam and Koraput districts (Gangte, 2017), although it is debatable whether the last recorded Meriah sacrifice was in 1852 or 1936. However, the Kandha substituted buffalo sacrifices for human sacrifices by the early 20th century (Behera, 2024; Behera & Rout, 2025; Macpherson, 1852; Thurston, 1909).

4 Research methods

4.1 Study area

This study was conducted under the broader framework of the Research Centre of Excellence on Regional Development and Tribal Studies (RCOE-RDTS), a collaborative initiative launched in 2019 by the World Bank and the Higher Education Department, Government of Odisha. The RCOE-RDTS focuses on understanding the socio-economic dynamics and livelihood strategies of tribal peoples and their customary practices in Western Odisha. As part of its 2023-24 research activities, the Centre of Excellence carried out an ethnographic study on the Kutia Kandh community in Kandhamal district, India. The fieldwork was conducted in the villages of Pakuru, Kalamguda, Dupi, Guma, and Pedam of Kandhamal district. These villages are integral to the Guma Gram Panchayat, located within the Tumudibandha Block of the Baliguda subdivision in Kandhamal district, approximately 140 kilometres from the district headquarters at Phulbani (Figure 1 and Table 1).

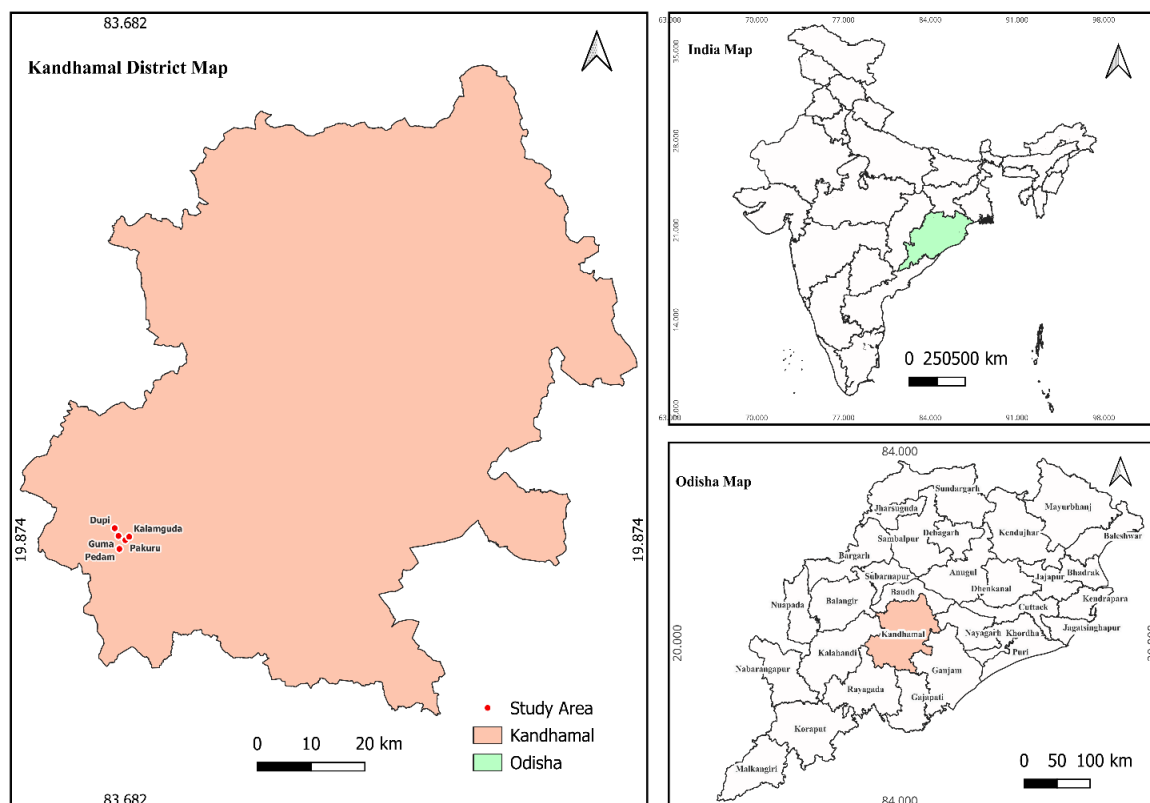


Figure 1: Maps of the study areas in the Kandhamal District of Odisha, India

4.2 Rapport establishment

Within the villages, the authors were facilitated by their own personal connections to the community. Having grown up in the same district and with a maternal connection to a Ganda⁴ family who act as mediators in Kutia Kandha marriages allowed the first author unique access to the community. The Ganda of Doma caste, while historically lower in status, has risen to prominence through political and economic shifts, influencing the Kutia Kandha's marriage practices and social structure. The author's stay with both Ganda and Kutia Kandha families provided an insider's perspective on the rituals and negotiations surrounding marriage, offering a deeper understanding of the cultural context.

4.3 Data collection and analysis

The authors conducted nine months of intensive fieldwork from October 2023 to June 2024, focusing on the Kutia Kandha community in Kandhamal district, Odisha. Initial data collection included a baseline survey utilising a structured schedule. As presented in Table 2, a total of 110 households across five villages were included. In addition, to capture the narratives and understand the dynamics of marriage practices through interviews, open-ended schedules were employed. Also, fieldwork was conducted using a combination of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Interviews were conducted with key informants which included village priest *Janni* (n=8), headman *Majhi* (n=5), shaman *Kutaka* (n=5),⁵ village elders, and

⁴Ganda is a traditional title used by the Kutia Kandha tribe for a senior male member of the Dom scheduled caste community. This individual holds the responsibility of resolving marital and other issues within the Kutia Kandha community, based on his knowledge and experience.

⁵In each village, there is typically one Majhi and one Kutaka. However, there are usually two Jannis: one serving as the head priest and the other as an assistant, both of whom are regarded as Janni.

individuals involved in the tribe's marriage ceremonies. Both formal and informal interviews on the marriage practices were conducted.

In-depth interviews related to objectives were converted into case studies and were recorded thoroughly, providing a comprehensive ethnographic account of diverse marriage forms. Further, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility in the conversations, enabling participants to share personal insights while also allowing for the comparison of common themes across interviews. All narrative inquiry data were recorded with mobile, camera, and field diary. The data were carefully collected for later transcription. The qualitative data derived from interviews and participatory observation were analysed using "Narrative Analysis" within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach focused on interpreting respondents' narratives, with particular attention to identification of four distinctive forms of marriage: negotiation, arranged through reciprocal gift exchange; capture, symbolic act of abduction; elopement, couples cohabit prior to formal recognition; and service, in which the groom resides and labours within the bride's household.

The study has certain limitations while collecting the data from the field, particularly in relation to gender perspectives. Despite the welcoming nature of the community, women's views on marriage remain relatively underexplored. Although efforts were made to engage with female respondents, their reserved nature limited the depth of interaction, resulting in fewer opportunities to ask detailed questions and making interpretation challenging. Another limitation relates to accessibility of respondents during daytime. Most community members leave early in the morning for forest-based livelihood activities, leaving the village empty except for a few individuals, such as those who are unwell or engaged in specific local responsibilities. This significantly constrained opportunities for consistent interaction and data collection.

4.4 *Ethical considerations*

The principal investigator's home institution obtained approval (131/PGA/2023) from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The study was conducted in accordance with the Institutional Research Ethics and the Declaration of Helsinki including the relevant ethical and methodological procedures such as safeguarding participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Formal ethical approval was obtained by the Ethical Review Committee of the author's home institution. Given the vulnerable status of the Kutia Kandha tribe, before the interview, we obtained their verbal consent on use of their information and photographs in the research and also repeatedly explained the purpose of our study. In addition, we took written consent from the community leader and sought permission to use participants' photographs in the research. We adopted this method because many of our participants were unable to read and write. We also never asked names, avoided any remarks regarding their socio-economic status that could be interpreted as discrimination, and did not question their sentiments or judge their decisions or character. In the study, we used pseudonyms to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Data collected during the fieldwork were stored securely, and the findings were shared with the community as part of a reciprocal relationship. All interactions were conducted with sensitivity to the cultural norms of the Kutia Kandha, and efforts were made to minimize any disruption to their daily lives.

5 Results

5.1 *Marriage by negotiation (Sedi Bengana)*

Marriage by negotiation involves a careful balance between family relationships (kinship) and the new relationships formed through marriage (affinal relations). During the negotiation process, families of the bride and groom, especially their fathers, play a key role in arranging the marriage and deciding the bride price. This process highlights the tension between maintaining strong family ties and creating new connections through marriage (Fortes, 1962).

For instance, during the fieldwork, researchers observed a case of marriage by negotiation in the community. The groom Mr. Rabindra, aged 20 years from the Pakuru village, and Ms. Sona, aged 17 years from Kalamguda village, met through family arrangements. The groom's family, both male and female



Figure 2: A negotiation marriage after elopement in Pakuru village, where the fathers of the bride and groom are finalizing the marriage arrangement and agreeing on the bride price.

members, bring rice and liquor to the bride's house, though the quantity varies. These offerings symbolize a marriage proposal. Acceptance of these items by the bride's father signals the start of the formal agreement. The *Jula* (bride price) is set at Rs. 500 (\$5.95). It can vary between Rs. 100 (\$1.19) and Rs. 3000 (\$35.69), paid in cash and kind, including items such as *kuri* (bell-metal bowls), clothes, liquor, buffalo, goats, hens, rice, paddy, and pigs. After this, the engagement date is set.

During the engagement, Rabindra's family visits Sona's house and gifts her a ring and a chain as a promise of marriage. The marriage ceremony begins a month later, starting with the turmeric ceremony, where both bride and groom visit the sacred field. A *Janni* (priest) worships *Dharni Penu*, the deity, offering alcohol and turmeric and sacrificing a cock, which is then eaten with rice. The bride and groom collect soil from the sacred place, return home and deposit it in a ritual called "*Handi Sara*," to prepare for the wedding pavilion. Both then bathe in turmeric water (*haldi pani*), accompanied by traditional songs, after which they remain confined to their homes until the wedding. Rabindra's female relatives visit Sona's home to apply turmeric on her body, marking a shared ritual between both families.

Afterwards, guests from Rabindra's village arrive for the wedding. They are first served *mahuli* (also known as *Irpi Kalu* in Kui), a traditional liquor prepared from *Madhuca longifolia* flowers (Figure 4), followed by a feast of buffalo and goat meat. Buffalo meat, enjoyed by the elders, is ceremonially eaten by the fathers of the bride and groom, sealing their bond as *samdhi*⁶ in the kinship system. As part of the wedding festivities, the villages of both groom and bride join in singing and dancing to a song called '*sedigaani*⁷,' sung

⁶The term *samdhi* is associated with teknonymy, which is used by fathers of both groom and bride to call each other.

⁷This is the folk song sung by the *Sedi* (friends: boys and girls) of both bride and groom and *gaani* means singing, as a part of ritual, for the betterment of their marriage.



Figure 3: After negotiation the Janni and Girl's family are blessing the couple (girl with traditional attire and boy with casual red t-shirt).

in the Kui language, highlighting the role of *Nerandali*⁸ as a guide for the bride. Elder villagers participate in the celebration until the bride is escorted to a separate hut, where her friends adorn her with traditional ornaments.

In the afternoon, the bride is blessed by the *Janni* of both villages, first at the altar of *Dharni Penu* and then at the house, before being prepared for her final departure (Figure 3). She is dressed in a saree, adorned with necklaces, bangles, and other jewellery, and seeks blessings from her elders. Before leaving the village, she undergoes another ritual at the outskirts. At the outskirts of the village, a noteworthy farewell ritual takes place, symbolized by a ten-foot-high Sal tree log. This Sal log serves as a marker for the bride's departure. Her friends cut the stump, marking the start of a symbolic game. The bride clings tightly to the Sal stump, standing in an open area, surrounded by her female friends and women from her village, who form a protective chain around her. In response, women from the groom's village create a larger circle around them. What follows is a lively and symbolic test of strength between the women from both villages, with pulling and pushing to symbolize the transition. The groom's women attempt to pull the bride away from the Sal stump. Once they succeed, the bride departs with the groom to his village, marking the end of her life in her native village and the beginning of her new journey. Here the *Janni* blesses her by spitting on her head to ward off evil, massaging her with *Tolo*⁹ oil while invoking the deities for her well-being in her new home.

On the wedding day, the groom, accompanied by friends and village elders, arrives at the bride's village to partake in the feast. After the marriage, when the new married couple enter into the groom's village, all family members and the villagers worship the village main god together with the *Janni*. After that

⁸The term *Neran* means sisters of groom.

⁹Oil made from Sal tree's flower.



Figure 4: The serving of mahuli liquor to the villagers as a traditional gesture of gratitude during the marriage ceremony. Left: Mahuli liquor being offered to the bride's father. Right: Mahuli liquor being served to the women of Pakuru village.

they take the bride along with songs and dances; then in the courtyard they worship the family deity. At the time of entry, the bride took the *Nananda putuli* along with her. After having entered the house, both bride and groom went to the village pond to worship for their happy married life. Then after 3 days, 7 days or 15 days the bride returns to their father's house. This is called *Makka leutani*. Finally, the bride prepares the special dish, Sargi Pitha, for the groom's family as a sign of respect. The 'Ghara Gharol' ritual, where she performs household chores like fetching water or cooking, signifies her initiation into her new role as a wife and homemaker.

5.2 Marriage by capture (*Jhika* or *Reja nona*)

Marriage by capture originated with the need for exogamy, which means marrying someone from outside one's own group or family. In this practice, men would capture women from other clans to marry them. Because marriages were limited to women from outside the group, there were often not enough women available for the men who wanted to marry. This shortage of women resulted in the practice of capturing brides from other groups (Opler, 1943). The shortage of women may have been partly due to practices such as female infanticide, resulting in a natural deficit of women for exogamous unions. Marriage by capture has been observed in Kutia Kandha villages a decade ago although it is already on the verge of extinction in recent times. Two examples are provided below¹⁰.

1. Mr. Jibanta of the village Dupi, aged 21, expressed his desire directly to Ms. Tara of the village Pedam, aged 18. Jibanta confided in his close friends about his love and their discreet relationship. He shared his intention to abduct the girl from her parents and sought his friends' assistance. Once his friends agreed, they collectively decided on the date and time for the capture. He and his friends then waited for an opportune moment, when during a weekly market day, Jibanta observed Tara's activities. When the moment came, Jibanta lifted Tara and ran away. Her friends attempted to dissuade him, and the boys of Tara's village tried to oppose the abduction, resulting in a physical confrontation between the two village groups. Since Jibanta's group was better prepared, they managed to escape with Tara to a safe location, out of reach of the youth from her village. Although this may appear as a forced marriage, it is a culturally accepted form of marriage in Kutia Kandha society, and the police do not interfere.

2. In another instance, Ms. Anita of Pringel village, aged 22, is the wife of Kushal Majhi aged 23 of Pedam, a Kutia Kandha village. Now Anita lives in the house with both her son and her husband. Ms. Anita, now married to Kushal Majhi, experienced a similar type of marriage known as *Jhika Biha*. Anita initially did not like Kushal. Anita and Kushal lived in neighbouring villages, separated by a river. During a *Jatra* (fair) organized in Kushal's village, Anita had gone with her friends to watch the event. Kushal noticed her

¹⁰The respondents narrated to the researcher their marriage story, which had happened a few years ago.

there and approached her, expressing his affection. Anita rejected him and left. One day, while Anita was bathing alone in the river, Kushal, accompanied by his friends, who were hiding nearby, forcibly took her with him. They followed closely behind as he brought her to his home. Upon arrival, they performed the ritual of washing their feet in turmeric water, marking her formal entry into Kushal's house. Despite her resistance, Anita was forced to stay because this type of marriage is common in their tribe. Two days after her abduction, Kushal's family informed Anita's family that their son had taken her. Anita's family did not object. The families then agreed to solemnize the marriage in a Shiva temple. After 11 days, the wedding took place in the temple, followed by a communal feast for the villagers. After three days, Anita returned to her parents' house, where she stayed for two days before rejoining Kushal at their home. Now both Kushal and Anita are living happily, with a lot of love between them.

5.3 Marriage by service (*Ghar-join Sachenja*)

Brideservice refers to a time when a groom-to-be works for the bride's family as part of the marriage process. This service can be provided to the bride's father, mother, or even directly to the bride. It typically includes a period where the groom lives with the bride's family, similar to a trial marriage (Bossen, 1988).

An example is the case of Mr. Subham, a 22-year-old from the village of Pakuru, who was deeply in love with Mama, an 18-year-old from the village of Nuamunda. However, due to his poor financial situation, Subham could not formally propose marriage. In light of this, Subham, accompanied by his parents, the village headman (*Majhi*) and the religious leader (*Janni*), visited Mama's home. They explained to her parents their inability to pay the bride price (*Jula*) and the *Dal Mamuli*¹¹ (community feast). To compensate, they proposed that Subham would reside in Mama's home as a son-in-law (*Ghar join*) for a period of three years, during which he would assist with household chores and agricultural work. They also assured the family that the bride price and Dal Mamuli would be provided when their financial situation improved.

The marriage was agreed upon on the spot, and from that day forward, Subham stayed at Mama's house while his parents and the village representatives returned home. During his stay, Subham was not allowed to engage in conjugal relations with Mama until his father hosted the communal feast for her villagers. He offered his services to his future father-in-law for three years in lieu of the bride price (*Jula*).

After completing his service, Mama's parents were satisfied with Subham's conduct and contribution, and the marriage was performed in a simple ceremony. They offered Subham the choice to either stay permanently in his in-laws' house or return to his own village with Mama. Subham chose to return to his village with his wife. While this type of marriage was considered less prestigious than a formally arranged marriage, the couple eventually married.

5.4 Marriage by elopement (*Sedita Tanji or Guisat sedi*)

Marriage by elopement in tribal societies typically refers to a union where a couple, without the consent or formal agreement of their families, leaves the community to establish their relationship. Elopement often arises in response to familial or social obstacles to marriage. While it may initially bypass traditional rituals, the couple is usually accepted back into the community after performing compensatory rituals or making payments to the bride's family (Vidyarthi & Rai, 1977).

An example of this can be seen in the case of Ms. Rani Majhi from the village of Dupi, who is now married to Mr. Raghu Majhi, aged 21, from the village of Pringel. Rani, currently 18 years old, lives with her mother-in-law, father-in-law, and husband, though Raghu works in Kerala. Their relationship began when the girl was 13 years old and the boy was 16, both attending the same school. As classmates in seventh grade, they fell in love and maintained a relationship for two years. However, when Rani informed her parents of their intent to marry, her family did not approve of the relationship. Faced with this opposition, Raghu and Rani decided to elope and sought refuge in a relative's house. When Raghu's family noticed his absence and couldn't locate him, they grew worried. His friends were also unaware of his whereabouts. After searching for several days, they discovered that Raghu was staying with Rani at the relative's house.

¹¹ A community feast hosted by the groom's family to formalize the marriage arrangement.

Initially, this news caused anger within Raghu's family, but the situation eventually calmed down, leading to their acceptance of the marriage.

After a few days, the boy brought the girl to his home. A few days later, the village chief (*Majhi* and *Janni*) went to the girl's village to inform their village chief about the situation. They explained that the girl had eloped with a boy from their village, and because they were both teenagers, they acted impulsively without understanding the consequences. The village heads suggested that both families come together to settle the matter. After that they fixed a date to come back home. On the scheduled day, the girl's family approached the boy's village chief and mentioned: "A cow of our village (the girl) has gone missing. We have received news that cow (the girl) is in your village. Can you tell us if it is in someone's house?" Then the village chief led them to the boy's home, where the formal meeting took place with both families present. During the meeting, the girl's family asked the newly married couple if it was your own decision to be together and if they were committed to supporting each other for the rest of their lives. When the couple confirmed their decision, the marriage was considered final. Afterward, the girl's family requested the bride price (*Jula*), which was set at Rs. 1100, along with demands for buffalo, goat, and pig. Once their demands were met, both families shared alcohol (*mahuli* and *handia*), enjoyed a feast which was prepared in the boy's village, and celebrated with dancing and merriment. By evening, the girl's family returned to their village.

After seven days, the boy's family members went to the girl's family and the boy's mother washed their feet in turmeric water in the courtyard of the house and took the boy and girl inside the house. Everyone in the house got them married in a Shiva temple after another 5 days. After the wedding was over, a small feast was prepared for the family members.

5.5 Remarriage of the widow or widower and divorcee

In the Kutia Kandha community, widows, widowers, and divorcees have the freedom to remarry. A widow can choose to marry her deceased husband's younger brother or any other person of her choosing. Similarly, a widower can marry his deceased wife's younger sister, the widow of his deceased younger brother, a divorced woman, or any other woman he desires.

Divorce initiated by the husband is rare, but there are instances where the wife divorces her husband to form a new union. In such cases, the woman's father must return all the *gontis* (bride price) that the husband paid when the marriage was initially arranged (Thurston, 1909). To finalize the divorce, a meeting is convened in the husband's village, with the presence of the wife's parents. The meeting is presided over by the Janni (the village religious head), during which the husband presents his grievances against the wife. After the matter is discussed, the Janni delivers the final verdict. If the divorce is attributed to the husband's wrongdoing, he is not entitled to reclaim the bride price from the wife's family. In the case of mutual divorce, both parties are free to remarry, provided they have mutual consent and the approval of their guardians. These remarriages do not require the exchange of a bride price (*Jula*), nor are formal wedding ceremonies conducted. Instead, the husband typically hosts a small gathering for village officials, elders, and close relatives, offering food and liquor based on his financial capacity.

6 Discussion

Marriage as a social institution has undergone rapid change in recent times (Sahoo et al., 2021). As we noted above, among the Kutia Kandha, various socio-economic and cultural factors have significantly impacted traditional marriage practices, and the community continuously negotiates between preserving its cultural identity and adapting to changing circumstances. At present, the four forms of marriage discussed earlier are only rarely observed in their traditional form. Among these, marriage by elopement has become increasingly popular among the younger generation, where couples leave without prior parental consent and later seek social recognition of their union.

The practice of marriage by capture has declined due to external influences as mentioned above. Village elders and the Janni (spiritual leader, 58-year-old, male) recall that during such marriages, "the

bride's family would often retaliate with brutal force, sometimes leading to injuries. If the bride's family was content with the groom, they would still engage in physical confrontations with the groom's village, leading to extreme violence. It was stopped for good." Elders remarked that it is fortunate such practices ceased decades ago, though occasional instances still occur, which the community generally tries to avoid. In our study, two documented cases involved respondents who had experienced capture marriage a few years ago, and villagers indicated that although the practice has not entirely disappeared, it has declined significantly in recent years. This agrees with documentation by an earlier anthropologist (Hardenberg, 2017), who recorded similar practices during his fieldwork among the Dongaria Kandha, where such practices were prevalent. However, at present among the Kutia Kandha, the practice appears to have almost entirely disappeared, and knowledge of it largely survives only among community members who had directly experienced or witnessed it. In our observation, the decline of capture marriage in the research area may be attributed to multiple factors, including legal awareness, government intervention, and initiatives undertaken by the Kutia Kandha Development Agency (KKDA). Moreover, traditionally, during the Meria festival, young boys from other clans would visit the host village and interact with young girls in *Daaska elu*¹². If a young boy developed an interest in a girl, he might attempt to abduct her as part of the marriage process. However, the institution of *Daaska elu* (dormitories) has undergone significant change in recent times. Increased awareness among parents and young girls, along with shifting social values and laws, has led to growing opposition to capture marriage, particularly as it is now widely recognised as being against the will of the woman. In the field, several parents also expressed their disapproval, noting that such practices are unlawful and no longer socially acceptable.

On the other hand, negotiation marriage (see Figure 2), also rooted in the tribe's history, has become expensive and burdensome due its ritual process. One of the elders (70-year-old, male) mentioned: *"The process is lengthy, and the associated costs have led to its decline. Traditionally, the groom's family would visit the bride's village and provide a feast and liquor to the villagers. If any family member disagreed with the terms, they would demand more food and alcohol, significantly increasing the expense."* A few members mentioned that after the marriage, the bride would leave the groom's household for extended periods, sometimes years. Moreover, in marriage by service cases, the groom seeks a wealthier bride and works for her family for several years, assisting in agricultural activities and providing food. This form of marriage sometimes overlaps with elopement marriages, where the groom elopes with the bride after providing some service to her family. On the other hand, elopement marriage has become one of the more popular and practical forms of union among the younger generation of the Kutia Kandha. Young couples often meet at school, festivals, or village functions, and fall in love. Elders in the community also find this method convenient, especially given the financial strain of more formalized marriages. During these marriages a mediator, or Ganda, encourages both families to conclude the rituals quickly, often within two days. During the fieldwork, it was observed that most Kutia Kandha households have limited economic resources. Only a few families possess substantial land and assets. In such contexts, when daughters from wealthier families marry, the groom is often expected to remain in the bride's household and take care of property and agricultural activities.

All these marriage practices have been influenced by education, economic changes, and processes of cultural assimilation, marking a notable shift in how the Kutia Kandha tribe perceives and conducts marriage. Education, particularly among the younger generation, has broadened perspectives and introduced new ways of thinking about traditional roles and relationships (Vikram, 2023). Exposure to formal schooling in the study location has led many to question customs that had once been integral to tribal life. For instance, we observed that in Guma village, there is a government-run tribal boarding school for Kandha students, where they are exposed to wider worldviews through the course curriculum. Teachers from other communities interact with students, sharing different lifestyles and ideas which Kandha students gradually and unconsciously incorporate into their own thinking.

At the same time, aspirations among some parents also reflect changing socio-economic expectations. During the fieldwork, it was observed that a section of parents desires their children to compete with other communities, particularly by observing patterns of wealth accumulation, hoping that their children will

¹²Youth dormitory in the Kui language called as *Daaska elu*, *Daaska* (or *Dhangidi*) refers to a young girl, while *Elu* means house.

achieve similar material success. However, this aspiration is not uniform across the community. While not all families explicitly seek such transformation, subtle influences are observed in everyday life, such as changes in dress patterns, food habits (including a shift from local foods to processed foods), and behavioural practices. These changes may not entirely replace traditional culture but they slowly reshape the process of acculturation, influencing the behavioural orientation of the younger generation.

Economic factors have also played a crucial role in transforming traditional marriage practices. Many Kutia Kandha families now depend on wage labour, including local and inter-district or inter-state migration, along with government schemes (e.g. Kalia Yojana¹³, Subhadra Yojana¹⁴ etc.), agricultural markets, and shifting cultivation for their livelihood. In most of the villages, younger members increasingly engage in seasonal migration to sustain household income. At the same time, women actively participate in slash-and-burn agriculture and in selling locally gathered tuber products in nearby markets. The Kutia Kandha Development Agency (KKDA), Belghar, has played a significant role in the development of the study area. The agency has distributed agricultural inputs such as sunflower, turmeric, and pulse seeds (e.g., horse gram and mustard), as well as mango saplings, and has also facilitated market linkages by purchasing produce from the community once it is cultivated. In addition, KKDA has contributed to infrastructure development by constructing roads, community houses, and dormitories (particularly for girls), and has provided employment opportunities for individuals who have completed intermediate or graduate-level education. These initiatives have benefited a section of Kutia Kandha youth. However, field observations indicate that inadequate monitoring and implementation of these projects have led to limited success in agricultural activities and these activities no longer provide sufficient economic returns. Many community members have become discouraged and have reverted to hunting, gathering, and traditional forms of agriculture.

As a result, the need for financial stability has placed considerable pressure on traditional forms of marriage, particularly negotiation marriages, which involve substantial expenditure. The rising costs associated with feasts, liquor, and other ceremonial obligations have led many families to prefer less expensive alternatives, such as elopement marriages. Boys and girls still fall in love while still in school, and under-aged marriage¹⁵ still occurs in these areas. In regions like Guma village, where the population is relatively larger and there is greater interaction with neighbouring communities such as Paano, Doma, and upper Hindu castes like Brahmin, Teli and Sundi, the Kutia Kandha have gradually over the years abandoned several of their traditional matrimonial customs by observing others' ritual practices and included a few of them in their own ritual practices. Also, the Paano community Paano and the Doma community (traditional marriage negotiators) impact greatly on the Kutia Kandha. The Paano community in particular has had a long relationship with them (Bailey, 1960). Previously, the Paano and Doma communities (in the study area, mainly members of the Doma community) acted as intermediaries for the Kutia Kandha, who due to their shy nature were hesitant to engage directly with the outside. In matters of external affairs, the Kutia Kandha often relied on the Doma community as a point of contact with the outside world. Historically, the Paano and Doma communities were considered socially lower than the Kutia Kandha. However, over time, these groups gained access to land records, education, and greater economic mobility, which enabled them to attain a comparatively dominant position. As these shifts occurred, the Kutia Kandha began to observe and, in some cases, attempt to replicate aspects of the socio-economic transformations experienced by the Paano community.

However, in the smaller villages Pakuru, Pedom, Kalamguda and Dupi, external influence remains limited. In these villages, a contradiction observed in that marriages are still conducted with community participation, with collective values and maintaining continuity with cultural norms. On the other hand, the traditional process of rituals has gradually become shorter. For instance, in Dupi village, marriages are conducted in a simplified manner, where families manage with a modest ritual, with a feast consisting of

¹³This is a government initiative, KALIA (Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation), designed as a farmer welfare scheme under which agriculturists received financial assistance of Rs. 5,000 (approximately \$53.91) per year. Currently, the scheme has been renamed as CM Kisan Yojana, under which beneficiaries receive Rs. 4,000 (approximately \$43.13).

¹⁴On a more recent field visit, it was also observed that women are receiving financial assistance under a government welfare scheme, which provides Rs. 10,000 (USD \$107.82) annually.

¹⁵The legal age of marriage in India is 18 years for females and 21 years for males.

chicken and local liquor, without extravagant expenditure. In contrast, in Guma village, even when marriages occur through elopement, they are performed following elaborate traditional customs, including traditional dancing, traditional music, multiple feasts, and decorative arrangements as per Kandha tradition. This suggests that relatively wealthier sections of the Kutia Kandha community are better able to retain and perform the full range of traditional marriage rituals. On the other hand, in more economically constrained and isolated villages, these practices appear to be gradually reduced to a minimal or symbolic form.

Likewise, reciprocity remains the origin and essence of marriage practices among the Kutia Kandha, where exogamy continues to operate as a fundamental principle embedded within their social structure. Reciprocity, in this sense, is not only an exchange of material goods and bride, but a deeper social philosophy that sustains relationships between families and villages. As mentioned, under the influence of acculturation, new forms such as elopement marriages have gained prominence more recently. Yet, rather than replacing traditional systems entirely, these practices coexist with them, often being absorbed into the existing framework of reciprocity. Even in elopement, subsequent negotiations, and ritual exchanges re-establish social ties and reciprocal relations. It can thus be understood that when a new practice is introduced by a few members of the community, and when it does not fundamentally disrupt existing values while offering practical convenience, it gradually gains acceptance and becomes incorporated into tradition. In this way, tradition is not static but continuously reproduced and reinterpreted through practice (Hénaff & Doran, 2013); (Hugh-Jones, 2008)).

7 Conclusion

The Kutia Kandha case of marriage demonstrates how reciprocity adapts to changing conditions, allowing marriage practices to evolve while preserving the underlying social logic that binds the community together. The community also holds a significant place in the history of tribal culture in India, illustrating how cultural values can be preserved and transmitted across generations while simultaneously engaging with processes of change. This adaptability is particularly evident in their marriage practices, where multiple ways of union formation are accepted, yet kinship ties and ritual reciprocity remain central. For the Kutia Kandha, the essence of marriage lies in its specific form and the maintenance of social bonds, reciprocal relations, and the continuity of cultural practices. At the same time, processes of acculturation through education, economic interaction and increased contact with other communities have introduced new ideas and practices into the social life of the community at large. These influences have not led to a complete erosion of tradition; rather, they have resulted in selective adaptation, where new forms are incorporated without entirely displacing existing cultural frameworks while also minimizing wealth expenditures. This demonstrates that acculturation within the Kutia Kandha is not a unilinear process of loss but a negotiated transformation where continuity and change coexist. As the younger generation moves forward with various job opportunities, bridging the generational gap becomes essential to ensure cultural continuity, social harmony, and a balanced adaptation to changing circumstances.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank to Odisha State Higher Education Council (OSHEC), Government of Odisha, India for academic support to Research Centre of Excellence Regional Development and Tribal Studies, Sambalpur University. The authors would also like to express their heartfelt thanks to the members of the Kutia Kandha community; without them, this research would not have been possible.

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