

Marriage among the Ūrālis of Travancore.

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THE Ūrālis are a small jungle tribe found in the Peermade and Thodupuzha taluks of Travancore. Their life of isolation on the hills has kept them away from the civilizing influence of the plains with the result that they preserve most of their primitive customs and manners. It is proposed to treat here of their marriage customs.

Marriage is by exchange of sisters. No man can have a wife unless he has a sister whom he can give in exchange. An Ūrāli cannot purchase a wife from her parents by giving the equivalent in property of some kind, whether it be in goods, cattle, or money. A man who has no sister to offer in marriage has often to lead a life of single blessedness. Formerly, an Ūrāli married as many wives as he had sisters. Now a man does not marry more than two women. A number of young men remain unmarried for want of women. The scarcity of women as wives was caused in large measure by the selfish action of old men. The result is unequal distribution of women as wives between males of the community, the old men having more than the young who had to go without any. Cross-cousin marriage is also in vogue. The marriage ceremonial is very simple in form. It takes place both before and after puberty. The boy's uncle settles the marriage. The bridegroom and father go to the bride's hut and escort the bride to their hut, where the bride's party is treated to a feast. Dowry consists of bill hook, clothing and vessels.

Polygamy was widely prevalent formerly. It is now very limited. A man marries more than one woman for assisting him in his agricultural operations or for want of progeny by his first wife.

Polyandry is said to prevail where there is a surplus of men. Rev. Mateer observes that the Ūrālis practised polyandry like the Todas, but it seems to have died out.

It is now observed that there are more males than females. In two hamlets there are 65 girls to 100 boys.

The system of marriage by exchange of sisters is found among the Ullādans and Malavēdāns of Travancore, the Mādigas of Mysore, the Bhothiyas of United Provinces, the Garos of Assam, the Australians and other backward tribes of the world. It seems probable that this practice was at first a simple case of barter, and that it originated in a low state of savagery, when women had a high economic value as labourers, but when private property was at so rudimentary a stage that a man had no equivalent to give for a wife except another woman. The same economic motive might lead the offspring of such unions who would be cross-cousins, to marry each other, and thus the custom of cross-cousin marriage would arise and be perpetuated.

It is said that the exchange of sisters by their brothers was probably older than the exchange of daughters by their fathers, since relationship between brothers and sisters, children of the same mother, must have been well known and recognition of that relationship conferred on brothers a degree of authority which enabled them to exchange their sisters or their sisters' daughters for other women whom they either married themselves or gave in marriage to their sisters' sons.

The custom of cross-cousin marriage is considered to have arisen from exchange of women by brothers. It seems to have been the direct consequence of interchange of sisters in marriage and that the latter flowed directly from the economic necessity of paying for a wife in kind. Thus exchange of sisters co-exists with cross-cousin marriage not only among Ūrālis, the Ullādans, and the Malavēdāns of Travancore, but among other tribes in other parts of the world.