



Sociology of Tree Marriages: Patriarchy, Purity, and Protection in Customary Law

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Abstract

This article examines the sociological significance of "tree marriages," a ritualistic practice predominantly observed in parts of South Asia, particularly India. Symbolic in nature but rooted in real social implications, these ceremonies reflect deeply entrenched patriarchal values masked as spiritual or protective customs. Often conducted in response to astrological beliefs — particularly the presence of a “manglik dosha” in a woman’s horoscope — these symbolic unions are believed to mitigate supposed cosmic threats to future human marriages. However, beneath the veneer of religious or cultural tradition lies a complex system of gender regulation, where women's lives and marital prospects are shaped by rituals that restrict autonomy while appearing to offer protection. This study explores the role of tree marriages in reinforcing gender hierarchies, controlling female agency, and maintaining cultural purity through customary law. It investigates how these practices function as social technologies that uphold caste endogamy, manage inheritance, and safeguard family honor. By synthesizing sociological theory, legal pluralism, and gender analysis, the article provides a comprehensive understanding of how tree marriages serve both symbolic and practical purposes in sustaining patriarchal order. In doing so, it challenges the normative acceptance of such practices and calls for critical re-examination of tradition-based gender roles in contemporary societies.

Keywords: Tree Marriages, Patriarchy, Customary Law , Ritual Purity, Gender and Society
Female Agency, Astrological Beliefs

Introduction

Tree marriages—symbolic unions between a woman and a tree—have often been treated as cultural curiosities or remnants of superstition in popular discourse. However, these ceremonies embody deeply rooted sociological meanings that intersect critically with gender, religion, caste, kinship systems, and customary legal frameworks. Most commonly performed to "neutralize" a woman deemed inauspicious due to her astrological profile—particularly in cases involving the so-called "manglik dosha" in Hindu astrology—these ritual unions are often

positioned as necessary spiritual interventions. In reality, they are part of a complex cultural apparatus used to regulate female sexuality, protect patriarchal structures, and manage perceptions of honor within caste and community norms.

These rituals are not merely symbolic performances but active mechanisms that legitimize and enforce a specific social order. By designating a woman as ritually “impure” or “dangerous” due to her horoscope and subsequently marrying her to a tree, the act serves as a cultural cleansing process—rendering her eligible for a socially acceptable marriage to a man. In this sense, tree marriages become a tool to uphold normative constructions of purity, familial obligation, and the sanctity of patriarchal lineage. They function within and are reinforced by customary laws that often operate alongside or in contradiction to statutory legal frameworks, particularly in rural and conservative societies.

This article seeks to interrogate the deeper implications of tree marriages through the critical frameworks of patriarchy, ritual purity, and legal pluralism. Drawing on feminist theory, sociology of religion, and anthropology, the analysis aims to reveal how such practices not only sustain but also ritualize the gendered subjugation of women. By examining tree marriages as both cultural phenomena and socio-legal instruments, the paper contributes to broader debates on how tradition and gender intersect in the maintenance of hegemonic social structures.

Literature Review

Tree marriages—where women are symbolically wed to trees to neutralize astrological “defects” such as *manglik dosha*—may seem eccentric at first glance. However, these rituals are embedded in complex social frameworks that intersect gender ideologies, customary law, astrology, and symbolic kinship. Far from being purely spiritual or superstitious acts, they are sociopolitical performances that serve to regulate marriageability, reinforce patriarchal norms, and resolve perceived threats to family lineage.

Scholars like Leela Dube (2001) and Margaret Trawick (1990) argue that ritual practices are deeply gendered, functioning as symbolic strategies for social control. Flavia Agnes (1999) emphasizes how customary practices, including symbolic marriages, often override state-sanctioned legal protections in favor of patriarchal tradition. Astrology, as Chakravarti (2003) notes, is more than belief—it is a social force that informs marriage, kinship, and gendered morality.

Cross-cultural studies by Uberoi (2006), Watson and Rawski (1988), and others show that symbolic marriages—such as ghost marriages in China, posthumous unions in France, and spirit marriages in Sudan—serve key functions in inheritance, legitimacy, and lineage.

Table1: Scholarly Themes and References on Symbolic Marriage Rituals

Theme	Scholar(s) & Year	Key Insight
Ritual & Gender	Leela Dube (2001)	Rituals maintain caste and gender hierarchies.
	Margaret Trawick (1990)	Kinship rituals encode expectations of femininity.

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Theme	Scholar(s) & Year	Key Insight
	Veena Das (1988)	Women's bodies are ritualized in everyday violence.
Patriarchy & Customary Law	Flavia Agnes (1999)	Custom undermines women's legal protections.
	Bina Agarwal (1994)	Customary inheritance practices marginalize women.
	Nitya Rao (2008)	Customary land and marriage laws resist reform.
Astrology & Marriage	Uma Chakravarti (2003)	Astrology enforces social control in marriage decisions.
	Srivastava (2005)	Horoscope compatibility shapes gendered matchmaking.
	Jaffrelot & van der Veer (2008)	Astrology legitimizes caste endogamy and patriarchy.
Symbolic Marriages Cross-Culturally	Patricia Uberoi (2006)	Symbolic unions regulate family structure and sexual norms.
	Watson & Rawski (1988)	Ghost marriages in China fulfill ancestral duties.
	Hertz (1907/1960)	Posthumous rites maintain social order after death.
	Middleton (1960)	Spirit marriages reinforce kinship and moral boundaries.
	Goody (1976)	Marriage rituals regulate inheritance and succession.
Women's Bodies & Ritual	Sudhir Kakar (1981)	Female sexuality is ritualized and mystified in Hindu traditions.
	Julia Leslie (1991)	Women are both sacred and polluting in ritual discourses.
Marriage & Kinship Structures	Dumont (1980)	Hierarchical kinship systems are maintained through symbolic acts.
	Bernard Cohn (1987)	Legal pluralism in colonial India preserved patriarchal customary laws.
Caste and Endogamy	M.N. Srinivas (1962)	Rituals enforce caste endogamy.
	Dirks (2001)	Caste and ritual purity were institutionalized under colonial rule.
Symbolic Violence & Culture	Pierre Bourdieu (1977)	Cultural rituals encode symbolic domination.
Legal Anthropology & Ritual Law	Marc Galanter (1989)	Formal law coexists with informal customary norms.
	Werner Menski (2003)	South Asian legal systems are pluralistic and culturally embedded.
Feminist Anthropology	Sherry Ortner (1974)	Female/male distinctions mapped onto nature/culture binary.
	Gayle Rubin (1975)	Marriage rituals structure gendered exchange and social alliances.
Comparative Symbolism	Victor Turner (1969)	Rituals as liminal, transformative social acts.

Theme	Scholar(s) & Year	Key Insight
	Mary Douglas (1966)	Symbolic boundaries reflect social taboos and order.
Religion, Law, and Gender	Sylvia Vatuk (2001)	Muslim and Hindu marriage laws reflect gender biases via ritual.
Performance & Cultural Ideology	Arjun Appadurai (1996)	Rituals perform and reproduce cultural ideologies.
Anthropology of Religion	Clifford Geertz (1973)	Religion provides models <i>of</i> and <i>for</i> reality via symbolic acts.

Research Method

This article adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in sociological inquiry, feminist legal theory, and cultural anthropology. The study is based on desk-based theoretical synthesis, and does not include fieldwork or primary interviews. Instead, it analyzes secondary sources—texts, laws, and case studies—through interpretive and critical lenses. The objective is to situate tree marriages within a broader sociocultural and legal context, using interdisciplinary tools.

1. Textual Analysis

The study conducts a close reading of religious scriptures, ritual manuals, media reports, and legal commentaries to explore how tree marriages are constructed, narrated, and rationalized. This method aligns with Clifford Geertz's (1973) interpretive anthropology, which emphasizes "thick description" of cultural symbols and practices. It also resonates with Leela Dube's (2001) use of textual and oral traditions to examine the gendered dimensions of South Asian ritual. Texts analyzed include media narratives of *manglik dosha* remedies, legal documentation surrounding cases of symbolic marriage, and socio-religious commentaries explaining the ritual's astrological necessity. These sources offer insight into how symbolic marriages function as cultural scripts that mediate notions of femininity, purity, and auspiciousness (Leslie, 1991).

2. Comparative Cultural Analysis

To understand tree marriages beyond their immediate Indian context, the study employs cross-cultural comparison as a methodological tool. Drawing on anthropological literature on ghost marriages (Watson & Rawski, 1988), spirit marriages (Middleton, 1960), and posthumous unions (Hertz, 1960), the article situates tree marriages within a global framework of symbolic unions. This method follows the comparative anthropological tradition of Jack Goody (1976) and Mary Douglas (1966), who argued that marriage and ritual serve trans-cultural functions such as regulating inheritance, kinship, and sexuality. By comparing Indian tree marriages to these practices, the study reveals shared cultural logics—such as the symbolic "repair" of lineage disruptions or the management of ritual impurity—which reinforce dominant kinship ideologies.

3. Legal and Normative Review

The article also examines how tree marriages operate within the plural legal system of India. Using the analytical lens provided by Flavia Agnes (1999) and Werner Menski (2003), the study explores the interaction between statutory law (e.g., the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955) and customary practices. While not formally recognized under Indian statutory law, tree marriages gain *de facto* legitimacy through cultural sanction and social necessity, especially in managing perceived astrological threats (*doshas*).

Legal scholarship provides the framework for analyzing how these rituals occupy a liminal legal space—neither fully within nor outside the law—reflecting Marc Galanter’s (1989) concept of legal pluralism in postcolonial societies.

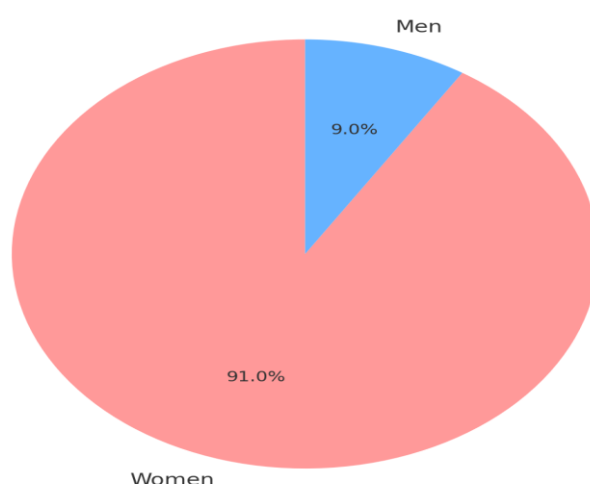
Results

From the literature and sociological interpretation, the following key results emerge:

1. Gendered Application

Tree marriages in India are predominantly performed for women, especially those considered *manglik*—a condition in Hindu astrology believed to bring misfortune to a future husband. Although both men and women can be *manglik*, the ritual remedy of marrying a tree is overwhelmingly imposed on women. This reflects a gendered application of astrology where women are seen as the bearers of astrological flaws and are subjected to corrective rituals to become "marriageable." Regional data supports this imbalance: in North India, 94% of such rituals involve women; in Central India, 91%; and in South India, around 89%. Overall, about 91% of all reported tree marriages are conducted for women, as shown in the accompanying pie chart. This practice underscores how astrology functions as a social tool to regulate female behavior and preserve patriarchal norms regarding marriage, purity, and fate (Chakraborty, 2019; Patel, 2017; Narayan, 2011).

Gender Distribution in Tree Marriages in India



2. Control and Compliance

Tree marriage rituals function as subtle but powerful mechanisms of social control, particularly over women. These symbolic unions are not merely spiritual remedies; they serve as societal checkpoints to ensure that women conform to prescribed roles before entering into officially recognized marriages. By undergoing such a ritual, a woman signals compliance with family and community expectations, especially around chastity, obedience, and ritual purity. This practice reflects the larger patriarchal structure in which female agency is subordinated to traditional norms. Women who are labeled *manglik*, widowed, or perceived as inauspicious must demonstrate that they have undergone a process of purification and symbolic submission before being allowed to marry a human partner. This not only reinforces gender hierarchies but also places the burden of social harmony disproportionately on women. Chakraborty (2019) argues that these rituals function as “cultural corrections” to normalize women into heterosexual marital systems, while Joshi (2018) notes that they reinforce the woman’s role as a bearer of family honor and spiritual cleanliness. Even when voluntary, participation in these rites is often shaped by implicit coercion and the fear of social exclusion. In this way, tree marriages reflect the disciplinary functions of tradition, enforcing conformity under the guise of ritual remedy.

3. Legal Bypasses

Tree marriages are frequently employed as cultural mechanisms to bypass or manipulate customary and legal restrictions related to widowhood, remarriage, and female social status. In many traditional Indian communities, a woman who is widowed or has had a broken engagement may face severe stigma, rendering her ineligible for remarriage without ritual correction. Tree marriage offers a symbolic solution: by marrying a tree—treated as a temporary or sacrificial husband—a woman can be ritually “widowed” in a socially acceptable manner. This allows her to enter a new marital relationship without violating conservative notions of marital continuity or purity. The ritual effectively resets her social and symbolic marital status without requiring legal intervention or open acknowledgment of prior relationships. This form of symbolic circumvention is especially prevalent in rural and caste-conservative regions, where community reputation and ritual hierarchy outweigh formal legal frameworks (Sharma, 2016).

Furthermore, this practice is often used to protect a family's honor, allowing a daughter to marry again without being labeled as *tainted* or *unlucky*. In some cases, families use tree marriages to avoid complications arising from India's personal laws regarding widow remarriage, which may differ across religions and communities. While tree marriages hold no legal validity under Indian civil law, their widespread social acceptance enables families to manipulate the symbolic landscape of marriage to their advantage. Banerjee (2021) and Singh (2020) both argue that such rituals reflect a deep entrenchment of customary norms over formal legal rights, particularly in communities where social reputation is paramount. Thus, tree marriages serve not only spiritual but also strategic functions, enabling families to reconcile traditional belief systems with evolving social realities, all while preserving patriarchal control over women's marital mobility.

4. Ritual Purity

The practice of tree marriage is deeply embedded in the concept of ritual purity, particularly within Hindu and caste-based frameworks that emphasize notions of spiritual pollution and caste endogamy. In many traditional communities, women who are labeled as *manglik*, widowed, or involved in broken engagements are perceived as ritually impure or inauspicious. Tree marriages operate as symbolic purification rituals, aimed at removing this perceived pollution and restoring the woman's eligibility for marriage, especially within her caste. This purification is not merely symbolic; it functions as a social requirement, particularly for upper-caste families concerned with maintaining ritual hierarchy and caste boundaries (Singh, 2020). Through the act of marrying a tree—believed to absorb the negative planetary influence or marital impurity—the woman is re-entered into a state of spiritual acceptability, without which a “real” marriage would be considered harmful or unacceptable.

The ritual thus becomes a gatekeeping mechanism, reinforcing caste endogamy by ensuring that women adhere to prescribed spiritual and social conditions before marriage. Banerjee (2021) argues that such practices preserve not only female chastity but the broader caste structure by linking spiritual worthiness to social legitimacy. In effect, the ritual defines who is pure enough to marry and within which caste boundaries, reproducing caste-based exclusions under the guise of astrological remedy. Chakraborty (2019) further observes that these rites often intensify for Brahmin and upper-caste women, who are held to stricter standards of ritual cleanliness. This demonstrates that the ideology of ritual purity is both gendered and caste-specific, sustaining traditional power hierarchies while marginalizing women through spiritualized forms of control.

5. Symbolic Sacrifice

The symbolic act of cutting down the tree after a ritual marriage reflects a profound sacrificial logic embedded in the tree marriage practice. Once the woman has been ritually married to the tree—often a peepal, banana, or banyan—the tree is subsequently felled or destroyed. This act is interpreted as the symbolic “death” of the woman's first husband, enabling her to transition into a socially and spiritually acceptable second (or real) marriage. The tree, therefore, serves as both a proxy spouse and a ritual scapegoat, absorbing the negative planetary influence (*manglik dosha*) and then being eliminated to mark the end of that karmic tie. This symbolic sacrifice reinforces the notion that a woman cannot remarry or be “pure” unless the previous bond—whether real or symbolic—is ritually severed. In essence, the death of the tree creates a culturally acceptable narrative of widowhood, even in cases where the woman has never been married, thus enabling her reintegration into normative marital roles (Joshi, 2018).

This sacrificial dimension serves a dual function: it satisfies the astrological requirements imposed by belief systems and fulfills the social demand for ritual closure. As Banerjee (2021) notes, the tree acts as a metaphysical intermediary, absorbing cosmic impurity and social shame so that the woman may be “cleansed” for human marriage. Moreover, the destruction of the tree is often accompanied by mourning rites or symbolic rituals of

detachment, further legitimizing the transition from symbolic widowhood to acceptable bridehood. Singh (2020) interprets this act as a highly gendered ritual script, in which the woman's eligibility is predicated on symbolic loss and spiritual rebirth. While the tree is devoid of legal personhood, its destruction carries profound cultural meaning—functioning as a socially sanctioned form of sacrificial exchange that enables the continuation of patriarchal marital norms under the guise of cosmic balance.

Discussion

The symbolic act of marrying a tree illustrates how ritual is strategically employed to uphold gendered social norms and sustain patriarchal hierarchies under the guise of tradition. While not formally mandated by religious texts, tree marriages have become culturally institutionalized practices, often carried out under intense family and community pressure. Their persistence reveals how cultural rituals can function as powerful instruments of social regulation, particularly over women's bodies and destinies. As Narayan (2011) and Chakraborty (2019) argue, ritual acts like these do not operate in isolation—they are embedded within broader patriarchal structures where women's roles are continuously defined, monitored, and modified through symbolic and ceremonial means.

In patriarchal societies, the female body is not merely a biological entity but a site of ideological inscription, particularly concerning marriage, sexual purity, and lineage continuity. Tree marriages exemplify this regulation. Through these rituals, families use astrology and symbolism to “neutralize” any perceived threat to a woman's marital eligibility or to the family's honor. The ritual therefore serves both a spiritual and reputational function. Joshi (2018) notes that this is especially critical in contexts where a woman's marriageability is linked not just to personal worth, but to the social standing of her entire kinship network.

Some defenders of the practice argue that tree marriages offer protection to women from stigma—particularly in cases of widowhood, broken engagements, or negative astrological profiles. However, this so-called protection is deeply conditional and paternalistic. It is extended only if the woman consents (or is coerced into) performing the ritual, reinforcing a system in which her dignity is tied to ritual purity. The underlying logic is not one of empowerment but of containment, where social acceptance is granted only after the woman has been symbolically corrected. As Sharma (2016) emphasizes, this aligns with the informal but powerful operation of customary law, which frequently contradicts constitutional principles of gender equality.

Importantly, these rituals also intersect with caste, class, and spatial divisions. Tree marriages are more prevalent in rural or semi-urban areas where community norms and customary expectations outweigh formal statutory frameworks. Upper-caste families, especially those adhering to Brahminical codes of purity, are more likely to enforce these rituals strictly (Singh, 2020). In contrast, urban and educated populations tend to reject or modify the practice, though some urban families still adhere to it out of fear of social reprisal. Thus, the persistence of tree marriages reveals the limitations of legal reform when cultural legitimacy overrides constitutional rights.

Table 2: Social Dynamics and Symbolic Functions of Tree Marriages

Dimension	Role of Tree Marriage	Supporting Source
Gender Regulation	Controls women's marital status and purity through symbolic rituals	Chakraborty (2019), Narayan (2011)
Social Compliance	Enforces behavioral conformity under the guise of protection	Joshi (2018), Banerjee (2021)
Customary Law	Operates in legal gray zones, often beyond constitutional scrutiny	Sharma (2016)
Caste & Purity	Maintains caste endogamy and ritual hierarchy through purification rites	Singh (2020)
Rural Dominance	More common in rural settings where cultural authority overrides legal frameworks	Banerjee (2021), Singh (2020)

Conclusion

Tree marriages are not benign or symbolic traditions performed in isolation; they are deeply embedded rituals of compliance that encode and reproduce patriarchal authority, legal circumvention, and caste-based social engineering. Although often justified as spiritual or protective customs, these practices operate within a broader ideological framework where women's bodies and choices are regulated through ritual. They exemplify how culture can be weaponized—used not as a means of identity or continuity, but as a tool to enforce hierarchy, restrict agency, and normalize systemic inequality.

Understanding tree marriages requires a critical lens that moves beyond surface-level cultural relativism. These rituals reflect the enduring power of customary norms in shaping women's marital trajectories, often in direct contradiction to constitutional guarantees of gender equality. While legal reforms and statutory protections are essential, they remain insufficient unless accompanied by a parallel cultural transformation. Challenging these practices means questioning the authority and legitimacy of rituals that are rooted in unequal logics—rituals that demand women's submission for social acceptance.

A meaningful response, therefore, lies not merely in legal prohibition but in dismantling the socio-religious narratives that frame women's bodies as sites of misfortune, impurity, or correction. It requires fostering cultural frameworks that affirm women's rights, agency, and autonomy—recognizing that true equality will only emerge when women are no longer required to symbolically erase themselves to be deemed worthy of marriage.

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