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In Her Husband's Family: A Newly Wed Woman's Expectations and Her New Family's Attitudes in Rural Assam, India

By Dilip K. Medhi¹

Introduction

Until recently, living in a joint family system was typical among Hindus and members of other religious groups in India. Living in an extended joint family was also a common practice. However, joint family groups and extended joint family living are now relatively rare, due to India's economic and social developments over the past four decades or so. Currently, the most common family arrangement is that of the nuclear family, comprised of a father, mother and their children. In rural areas, this nuclear family unit operates within a number of more traditional expectations and arrangements, however. Within a rural Hindu family, for example, a woman's status varies according to factors such as her age, her marital status, her relationship to different members of her family, her ability to bear children and her status as a mother. A young, newly wed woman may be treated differently by her in-laws than by her own parents; a young widow living in her husband's family may be treated differently by her new family than she would be were her husband still alive; a daughter-in-law from a poor family may be received differently than she would be received were she from a wealthier family. Similarly, a young unmarried woman living with her natal family may face a degree of hostility from a stepmother that she would not face from her natural mother.

The Data

This essay depicts a composite picture of the daily life of a young, newly wed woman living in rural Assam, particularly in the former Barpeta subdivision and the Kamrup district, during the period from the 1960's to the 1980's. The scenario I offer is based on my own personal experience and information gathered from interviews I conducted with thirty women and more than forty-eight men from Bhawanipur, Kalbari, Sarupeta and Kordoiguri in the North, Bajali and Tihu in the East, Sundaridia and Barpeta in the South, Sarbhog and Abhayapuri in the West, as well as other locations. Some of the women interviewed are sisters-in-law of my kinfolk and others of rural fraternity. Some of the males were my age, while others were elderly but quite receptive to speaking with me. The discussions were conducted in complete privacy, often without the aid of pen and paper. Many of the details the interviewees recount of family life reflect those of more traditional Indian arrangements, customs and practices. One exception is that many young, newly married women no longer tend to conceive children immediately. This may be due to the use of condoms and other contraceptive devices, information about and availability of which has been provided by the State and the Central Departments of Health and Family Welfare. A young woman must garner the permission of her husband in order to use contraceptives, however, and, typically, the discussion of such intimate matters is rare between husband and wife in many rural areas.

The following two tables show the way in which the thirty young, married women regard the way in which the members of their new family received them. They are documented with three parameters: normal, unusual and irritating. 'Normal' is taken as the day-to-day behaviour and talking terms in a family and 'unusual' reflects a new set of

conduct designed at alienating the newly wed daughter-in-law in her new family. Normal refers to an unbiased attitude whereas unusual involves a biased stance. The husband's reception to his wife is attributed to 'unusual' because of his neutral gesture and inability to exercise his authority to safeguard his wife.

<i>Parameters</i> → <i>Kinspersons</i> ↓	Normal	Unusual	Irritating
Father-in-law	√		
Mother-in-law		√	
Husband		√	
Brother-in-law			√
Sister-in-law			√
Grandmother-in-law	√		

Table 1: Situation with 27 newly wed ladies (90%)

<i>Parameters</i> → <i>Kinspersons</i> ↓	Normal	Unusual	Irritating
Father-in-law	√		
Mother-in-law	√		
Husband		√	
Brother-in-law	√		
Sister-in-law	√		
Grandmother-in-law	√		

Table 2: Situation with 3 newly wed ladies (10%)

How was it possible for me to conduct these interviews? My status as brother-in-law was most often an advantage, since it is common for family members of different genders to talk by the hearth over tea. In one case, I met with the woman only once, due to suspicious looks I received from the woman's brother- and sister-in-law. In another

case, it proved more comfortable and easier for me to interview a woman at her father's residence, as a guest in his home. To my trepidation, two women in different interviews spoke angrily and loudly without concern and within earshot of other family members. In five of the cases, the women's families, especially mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law, regarded me with much hostility. These five women cautioned me not to discuss their grievances with them: they claimed that, given the lack of security and support offered by their husbands, they were alive because of the love and affection they received from their fathers-in-law and grandmothers-in-law. Further, a few women, in tears, referred me to their mothers for information about their lives, and the mothers answered my questions without hesitation. I was able to observe two cases nearly everyday, given the women's nearby location. Many villagers, myself included, could hear early morning household arguments, fueled by complaints from brothers- and sisters-in-law to mothers-in-law, about the young wives. While the husbands and fathers-in-law were in the field, we could hear the cries of a young wife, cries similar to those that later spurred intervention by neighbors. Only three women reported that they were content in every aspect of their lives. These women responded to questions intelligently and thoughtfully. Their cases, though difficult to evaluate thoroughly, thus provide a significant contrast to the others.

Generally speaking, the women reported that intimate sexual relations with their husbands commenced after marriage and that participating in these relations was expected when living together as husband and wife. However, the women also reported a lack of spontaneous comforting as well as a lack of emotionally close, warm and leisurely discussions, all of which the women desired.

Many of the women wanted to know why I was interested in learning about their personal lives. I simply responded that I was inquiring out of courtesy and I never informed them that I might write about their experiences. In fact, initially I had no intention of doing so. However, my own bitterness about their conditions and my response to their heart-felt and moving narratives inspired me to present their difficult situations.

Ninety percent of the cases reveal a common experience (minor variations were ignored) and, therefore, I have collapsed the narratives into one hypothetical but representative case.

The Presentation

The following discussion details this picture of a young and newly married woman living with her husband's family in a rural Hindu society. Cultural expectations pressure this young newly-wed to respect and adjust to the habits, rhythms and practices of her husband's family, even if they are significantly different from those of her own natal family. Traditionally, she is expected to become, or to approximate, the "ideal woman" at any cost and the weight of this expectation accompanies a young, newly wed woman at every stage of her life in her husband's family.

Indian societies are predominately patrilineal with a few exceptions of matrilineal tribal societies. Therefore, after marriage, a young woman in rural Assam comes, along with her long-cherished hopes and dreams, to her husband's house to begin conjugal life. Upon arrival, she immediately faces new situations and new relationships, both formal

and informal. First, she receives a warm welcome from her grandmother-in-law and a welcome and blessing from her father-in-law. Next, her mother-in-law welcomes her with unsolicited advice and words of caution. Her unmarried sister-in-law greets her with critical and piercing glances, laced with annoyance. Finally, she receives a cool but high-handed reception from her new brother-in-law.

In addition, she comes to learn of her new responsibilities and she takes up her duties right away. She rises early in the morning to sweep the floors of the house, the courtyard, and to clear the cowshed, the roadside and finally to daub the floor of the house with mud, manure and water. Wanting to do well and meet the family's expectations, she completes these assignments with sincere diligence and then bathes beside the terracotta ring well. Dressing in the traditional Assamese garments, and with vermilion on her forehead, she enters the small place of family worship. Lighting an earthen lamp with mustard seed oil, she burns incense and, if time permits, recites religious scripture.

By now, the sun and the entire family have risen: her real work begins as she bows down before her parents-in-law and her grandmother-in-law. Her activity prior to this was solitary. Now, she is at the family hearth (where fire is generated out of the smoking rice-corn husk with a blowing pipe or by mouth), preparing food and tea for her family members. Some of her kin will have fermented rice for breakfast, while others will have tea and light snacks. She offers food and tea to every member of the family, some of who (especially her unmarried brother-in-law and her sister-in-law) come in one at a time. In fact, her brother- and sister-in-law demand special treatment, and they complain to their parents, especially to their mother, when their new sister-in-law fails to meet their requests to their satisfaction. The new young wife also prepares refreshments for her husband and father-in-law who left for the fields at dawn and gives the package to her brother-in-law to bring to them. Morning teatime ends without anyone inquiring if something is left for the young newly wed woman to eat.

Already we note two important features. First, the new daughter-in-law's needs are ignored with respect to the sharing of food. Second, her mother- and sister-in-law, who earlier shared the duties of cleaning the house, the hearth, the family's clothes and the cooking dishes and utensils, become late risers as they begin to enjoy some comfort and leisure at the expense of the daughter-in-law's labour.

Can we determine why such a phenomenon takes place in the family? Should we understand the newly wed daughter-in-law as a material asset, as equivalent to a maidservant? What can we know of the realities of her new life, including her desire to satisfy her husband's sexual needs, from her perspective?

Burdened by the fatigue that results from her tiring daily work, she cannot look back, nor can she expect anyone to understand her or to sympathize with her, except, perhaps, her husband. In the best case, her husband does not become a party to his mother, sister and brother's scheme to give her innumerable duties and to their design to find fault in her attempts to complete all of these tasks.

In Assam, there is no dowry system and no dowry death. A young wife's value lies in her ability to be hardworking and painstaking in what she does, and in her capacity to work like a spindle. And she tries to meet these expectations, since, among other

things, she feels that her performance reflects on her own father and mother. She wishes her new family to see her as an asset and, hence, to prize her as do her own parents.

After morning tea, she begins making arrangements for the mid-day meal. In between preparations, she might find time to steal to her room and glance at herself in the small mirror she received from her parents. Otherwise, she, like all new wives in Assam, gathers food for the mid-day meal from the household premises and family gardens. With a small knife or sickle in hand, she enters the garden to collect things like banana blossoms, a bunch of apple bananas (a variety of *Musa*; *Musaceae*), leaves of *bhedelota* (*Paederia foetida*; *Rubiaceae*), a few leaves of the *narasingha* plant (*Murraya Koenigii*; *Rutaceae*), some *madhuhulang*, *polygonum sinensis*: *Polygonaceae*), a bunch of young shoots of fern, few arum stems and other vegetables available. She proceeds to catch small fish from the backyard pools and swamp and to bring all that she has gathered to her mother-in-law, who awaits her in the kitchen. Her husband and father-in-law arrive from the fields just as she finishes her preparations and considers taking a much-needed rest over a bowl of tea. Since she is not permitted in the kitchen – in Assam, a daughter-in-law takes charge of the kitchen only after a formal initiation ritual that does not take place right away – she helps prepare the meal in the small hearth on which she prepared the morning tea.

After arrangement of the mid-day meal, she does the washing of the family's clothes and garments, which were already boiled in large earthenware or a cast iron container with washing soda. She takes them out in another tumbler, threshes against a wooden board beside the ring well and finally spread them in a bamboo bar or in a metallic wire at the family courtyard, pending their collection in the afternoon. Clothes washing was done once in a week earlier but became almost an everyday affair after her arrival. With another bath she takes her mid-day meal and then remains busy cleaning the crockery, the house and the compound. Later on, when she completes her tasks, she may take another bath, attend to the toilet, and attempt to have a nap that everybody is enjoying in the in the meantime. She might only catch a glimpse of her bed, however, as she hears her resting mother-in-law shouting, asking her to make rice flour for the afternoon tea's pancakes. Though her sister-in-law sometimes assists her, the young wife marches to the husking shed and she alone prepares the flour of rice that has been soaking.

Straightaway she runs to the hearth to make the pancakes and tea for the entire family. Though ensured a bowl of tea, she may or may not get a share of the food, depending on whether or not the family finishes off all that she has made. She remembers that her natal family always complimented her on her delicious pancakes and tea. Now, however, she does not receive a word of appreciation from anyone.

At sunset, she attends the small prayer house, lights a lamp and burns incense in a small earthen pot that she carries around and inside the household premises. She then lights the compound's kerosene lamps and lanterns.

If there are visitors, she makes tea for them. Otherwise, she becomes busy processing the vegetables and fish for the evening meal. As usual, her mother-in-law takes responsibility for cooking the meal in the kitchen.

The young wife goes to bed very late, since she must clean up after the evening meal. By the light of a kerosene lamp, she brings all the dirty utensils to the ring well,

and washes everything from the kitchen with ashes. By the time she reaches her bed, most of the family members, including her beloved husband, are fast asleep.

All these routine affairs continue week after week, until one day when the young wife develops drowsiness, nausea and notices that she has stopped menstruating. Her grandmother-in-law guesses her condition, and welcomes her pregnancy with laughter and a grin.

We might ask, however, whether the young wife anticipated her pregnancy and whether it was the result of a mutually satisfying sexual relationship with her husband. The degree to which many Indians are fully knowledgeable about sexual behavior is difficult to estimate. Though sexuality deals with procreation and sexual desire plays a central role in life, speaking frankly about sexuality in Indian society is considered immoral. Hence the topic is taboo both within a family and within society at large. In fact, a person seeking information about sexual matters is considered indecent. In addition to the social pressures discouraging talk about sexuality, the publicity about the dangers of AIDS/HIV has discouraged any sexual promiscuity that may have been present culturally and has added another layer of taboo to the topic of sexuality.

Of course, India's ancient literature provides numerous discussions of sexual activity, including prostitution. Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* is one such renowned classic. It describes a vast array of sexual behavior and practices, including sixty-four different *kalas*, or styles, of engaging in sexual intimacy. The great Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have numerous heart-throbbing descriptions of Lord Rama, Krishna and many beautiful earthly and celestial women. *Shrimad Bhagawata*, a work containing the holy words of Lord Krishna and the most holy work of Hinduism, holds even more elaborate descriptions. The middle of the tenth *skandha* or chapter is full of descriptions of love and the love-making of Lord Krishna and the *gopies*, his beloved women. This part of the work is popularly called the *Rasalila*. Although Indian culture thus contains many images and discussion of the erotic arts, we might question the access that all members of the culture have to this literature and its stories.

What might a young woman expect of conjugal life in rural Assam? Traditionally, both girls and boys expect marriage to provide the framework for sexual behavior. For a young woman, this would include the expectation of becoming pregnant and giving birth. The "ideal woman" lives a happy life with her satisfied husband and with children of their own.

Holding these rather general ideas, a girl child in rural Assam would likely learn about certain aspects of sexuality, such as menstruation, from her mother. She would, for example, have the privilege of attending her mother at the birth of any siblings. Would a girl have knowledge about sexuality beyond this, however? She would probably be privy to discussions between her mother and her mother's friends about sexual matters. Generally, this is one way by which female gender identity is formed and perpetuated in rural communities. Similarly, a young girl may discuss sexual concerns with her grandmother, with whom she often shares a bed. Finally, a girl may learn about aspects of sexuality from observing family animals and from the youthful gossip of other girls and boys. In tribal societies in the Assam Region in which young boys and girls sleep in dormitories, they may experience sexual intimacy firsthand. However, more detailed and practical aspects of sexuality remain little known to young people, especially girls and young women, in rural non-tribal communities.

Consider this to be the background of our young newly wed woman. Like other young wives in Assam, she conceives without much knowledge about her body or the biological aspects of conception and fetal development, and is confused and nervous. No one in her husband's family but her grandmother-in-law consoles and encourages her, though in fact she would benefit from the help and cooperation of each and every member of the family. She requires rest, but cannot afford it. She is still expected to fulfill all responsibilities assigned to her. In fact, the elder women of the village consider sweeping, cleaning and working at the husking lever a beneficial means to prepare a pregnant woman for a safe and healthy delivery. If she feels dizzy and drowsy, a village medicine man or a quack gives her a paste made from conch shell to eat, as well as a small bit of tigress *yoni* (reproductive organs). Her symptoms may be attributed to an attack by an evil spirit, in which case the village medicine man treats her with the touch of a non-edible fern, with charmed mustard seeds and with the chanting of hymns. Apart from having access to such treatments, the pregnant daughter-in-law at this stage receives no privileged access to milk, fruits and similarly nourishing food.

The young woman's parents soon learn of her pregnancy. Happy and proud, her parents meet with her father-in-law to plan the celebration of an auspicious event: the completion of her fifth month of pregnancy. On a day decided upon with the help of an almanac, her parents arrive with all varieties of good food. The village womenfolk gather together and recite holy songs, blessing the couple. The couple's ceremonial partaking of *panchamrit*, a holy food made of wholesome yogurt (*dodhi*), milk (*dugdha*), an extract of cream and butter (*ghrita*), honey (*modhu*) and sugar (*xarkara*), signifies the pregnant woman's need for energetic, healthy food. This celebration initiates the young, expecting wife into a period of formal support from her family, her husband's family, the village women and the general community. Previously a matter of private concern to the family with whom she lives, she now receives frequent visits from members of her natal family, who inquire after and monitor her health. Though continuing with her normal household duties and having to respond to the continued demands of her mother-, sister- and brother-in-law, she may rest when she feels unwell. Her husband, who may have previously resisted inquiring after her well being because of pressure from his parents and siblings, now asks her how she is feeling. As the pregnancy progresses, both families take care to provide her with good food. This time marks a period during which she grows closer to and more comfortable with her new family.

She may reflect on her days when she entered this family as a new bride and had to embrace a new life about which she was little acquainted. She thanks both God and her parents for her ability to cope with all of the present and past situations and she dreams of the baby who will soon sit in her lap. Will the baby look like her or her husband? She has seen her own mother's painful deliveries, but she is not afraid. She now understands what she could not have appreciated fully as a young unmarried girl in rural Assam: she is valued and valuable because of her tenacity and her ability to become pregnant while still young.

The young woman's parents, collaborating with her husband's family, celebrate another milestone, the eighth month of pregnancy, with more ritual. Known in Lower Assam as *jeora*, which literally means "to fence," this ritual is performed to safeguard the pregnancy. Village women recite devotional songs, blessing the pregnant woman. Her

parents provide a ritualistic feast, and give their daughter a new dress and her husband a *gamocha*. She now leaves her husband's family dwelling for a month and retires to her parents' residence. Though somewhat shy before her family, she freely enjoys the closing days of her pregnancy under the watchful care of her parents.

She returns to her husband's home for the delivery of her child, an event eagerly anticipated by all of her family members. Much depends, both for her and for her husband's family, on her delivering a healthy child. Ultimately, her worth will be decided by the gender of her baby.

As labor pains commence, a village woman designated as a qualified midwife attends to the delivery and is aided by women family members and perhaps a few women from the village. Male family members wait outside until the birth is announced. The young woman delivers her child and her relatives learn that, as hoped for by all, it is a boy. The family responds joyously, and the young mother smiles faintly at her success. A few branches of the *neem* plant or margossa tree (*Azadirachta indica: Meliaceae*) are tied atop the front and rear doors of the house in order to stop evil spirits from entering.

The delivery of a healthy boy is the young woman's highest achievement. Everyone now truly appreciates her and her parents. Her grandmother-in-law becomes immensely happy. Her mother-in-law already begins to care for her and the child. Her sister- and brother-in-law come forward to receive their tiny nephew and begin to warm to their sister-in-law. Her father-in-law sits on the veranda with his *hukka*, chatting and celebrating the birth of his grandson with his friends, over bowl after bowl of tea.

Only now is she regarded with full appreciation and evaluated positively by her husband's family. She is lucky to have endured the many difficult ordeals required of her and to have pleased her husband's family. Her physical stamina aided her in meeting the expectations of this family. She attributes her begetting of a male child to the grace of God.

Discussion

A critical appraisal of the attitudes of the different kinspersons to a newly wed young woman reveals that they range from very good in cases of the fathers- and grandmothers-in-law, to most unwanted in the case of mothers, brothers- and sisters-in-law. The interviews upon which the portrait of the newly married woman is based suggest that the father-in-law is generally complacent. The mother-in-law is skeptical and critical, exercising her authority with faultfinding vigilance. A brother-in-law is always unhappy with his new female family member. A sister-in-law usually responds with similar disdain, though she may feel that her position in her family is threatened in ways her unmarried brother does not. The grandmother-in-law is always supportive of the young wife, however, and she supports the young woman throughout her difficulties with smiles.

In rural Assam, Hindu families are basically patrilineal and male dominated. However, with respect to the control of a young newly wed woman, the mother-in-law plays a dominant role and decides the young woman's fate and position in the family. The interviews completed for this paper suggest that, although a daughter-in-law may have enjoyed some privilege in her previous home as an unmarried girl, upon marriage she is ranked as having a status lower than that of the unmarried daughter of her

husband's family. In fact, a sister-in-law often aligns herself with the young bride's mother-in-law in order to exercise control over her. Brothers-in-law behave similarly. Perhaps the most unfortunate common aspect revealed in these interviews is a husband's inability or reluctance to say anything on his wife's behalf and against the claims, actions and expectations of specific members of his family. Ultimately, a young bride depends upon God alone for a successful integration into her new family

From the time of her entrance into her father-in-law's residence to the delivery of a healthy male child, a young newly wed woman in rural Assam must clear many hurdles. In fact, she draws on her good upbringing, her good health and her physical strength to meet all the demands placed on her. Much of India's rural culture considers a marriageable girl as a *mal* (an asset or set of goods). Often one hears the father of a boy say that the *mal* for his son must be of the quality he deserves. Generally, the quality of a *mal* depends on the quality of her natal family, her upbringing in this family and her sound health. In Arunachal Pradesh, a married woman's strength is considered the asset of her husband because it increases his number of hands to work in the *jhum* fields. A male can increase substantially his wealth with each wife he acquires (he may have as many as seven), given the combined physical strength of the woman. In Hindu religion and astrology, a marriageable girl is considered a jewel (*ratna*) and the father-in-law of a prospective bride carefully scrutinizes her qualifications, just as a buyer of gemstones inspects a possible purchase with great care.

Given these cultural expectations and pressures, we might say that the parents of our composite young women prepared their daughter very well, ensuring that she had the personal resources to procure a husband and to adjust to her new family. Given the control a mother-in-law has over her daughter-in-law, parents may be said to do well to raise a girl who will become a most qualified daughter-in-law. Any young bride might very well be subject to harsh treatment by her husband's family, especially by her mother-in-law. It benefits her to adapt quickly and well.

These interviews also reveal that young pregnant woman in rural Assam may not receive good prenatal care and be guaranteed safe, hygienic deliveries. Currently, elderly women in rural Assam often complain that the replacement of husking levers by small rice mills will result in women who will be unprepared for the physical demands of pregnancy, delivery and a married life as a mother. One recent "advancement" in the delivery of babies is that a razor blade has replaced a naturally sharp piece of bamboo, extracted from a bamboo post of the dwelling house by a stroke of a *dao* (hatchet), as an implement to cut the placenta.

Furthermore, these young women often come to marriage with an inadequate understanding of their own sexual needs and the sexual expectations accompanying rural married life. A girl may have heard stories from the *Shrimad Bhagawata* of Lord Krishna's lovemaking and formed a romanticized vision of her sexual future with an attentive husband. However, such a vision shatters with the physical demands of household duties. Because of her exhausting work and her fatigue, a young woman may yield all control of a couple's sexual life to the husband.

Given the discussions that serve as the basis for this paper, the portrait of a young newly wed woman in rural Assam that I present reflects the experience of a number of similarly situated women. Of course, there are many other experiences these women have to share. I hope to write of them in the future.

Acknowledgement

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