

## Polyandry Practiced among Jaunsari of Uttarakhand: Scope for Futuristic Study

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### Abstract

Man learns his behaviour and behaviour that is learnt denotes his culture. Thus culture is a system of learned behaviour shared by and transmitted among the members of a group and every group have tried to maintain their cultural heritage / uniqueness by the effort to make their culture distant from the others. The most significant task for the students of anthropology is to observe the different cultural systems and to find out the cultural units of distinctive pattern of a culture or group that mark them unique from the rest of the world. Marriage is such a prime cultural unit and at the same time may be viewed as a reference point to locate the diversity and uniqueness of each culture at intra and inter analytical level. In this paper researchers have tried to share their observations regarding polygamous marriage especially polyandrous marriage practiced among the Jaunsari people living at the village of Lakhmandal, state of Uttarakhand.

**Keywords:** Culture, Jaunsari, Polygamy, Polyandry

### Introduction

Polyandry is a remarkably rare marital form occurring in only 4 of the 565 societies in Murdock's World Ethnographic Sample (Murdock 1967). It can be best defined as the form of marriage in which a woman has more than one husband at a time. This kind of polyandry has already been revealed from many parts of world (Wastermarck 1922). Its well authenticated and most prevalent occurrences are documented from Tibet (Peter 1955), Nayar of Travancore (Upadhyay & Pandey 1993), Irava of British Malabar (Mandelbaum 1938), Todas of Nilgiri Hills (Upadhyay & Pandey 1993), Singhalese (Leach 1955). But the most consistent practitioners of polyandry in India today are probably the residents of certain sub Himalayan hill area in Himachal Pradesh, the Northern Punjab and Uttarakhand (Berreman 1962).

Among the inhabitants of lower ranges of Himalayas, the polyandry has been reported in several districts (Dasgupta 1921) and has been explored in some details in Jaunsar Bawar region, a subdivision of Dehradun District in Uttarakhand (Majumdar 1955, Saksena 1955). This region is inhabited by Jaunsari tribe who mythologically claims themselves as the descendents of the Pandavas of the Mahabharata. In 1967, the Government of India recognised the Jaunsari as a Scheduled Tribe (John 2008).

According to the 1991 Census of India, the population of Jaunsari is 96,995 (John 2008). Among the Jaunsari people, there are various castes, such as the Khasas (Brahmins and Rajput) who enjoy a high social status then the Luhar, Badgi, Bajgi as the middle class and Harijon, Dom, Koli, Koi, Auj, Kolta are the low caste. The Koltas are the main service caste who occupies the lowest position in the local socio-religious hierarchy and "Khasa" Brahmins and Rajputs are the main cultivators and play the dominant and leading role in social, economic and political of all the sections of the people. The Jaunsari live in extended families in villages that consist of loosely grouped homes surrounded by

farmlands. The main occupation of the Jaunsari is agriculture, which they supplement by raising buffaloes, cows, goats, and sheep. Nowadays to sustain their livelihood they have taken up the role of manual labourers and work in the forest grounds as well as in the farms of well-to-do cultivators. Their principal crops are rice and potatoes, and a variety of other vegetables are also grown. They use fertiliser as well as a system of plot rotation in which the ground is allowed to lie down uncultivated for certain period of time. Wet rice cultivation is done during the monsoon season. Their diet is very simple including lentils, vegetables, fruits, milk and sometimes meat also. Among themselves they speak jaunsari but to others the communication is Hindi.

This paper is based on part of a larger study carried out among the Jaunsari community in Lakhmandal village of Uttarakhand. The objective of the research that led to this paper is set to indicate and portray the practices of polyandry among Jaunsari people of Lakhmandal. The study further expects to contribute an observation based insight on the said issues that may instigate further social research.

## **Methods**

The present study was empirical and descriptive in nature. In this visit, researchers talked informally with the villagers asking their perspectives and views regarding marriage. The methods of data collection were mainly based on preliminary surveys, observations, open ended interviews and inquiries in order to have deeper understanding. Researchers never tried to determine or to identify any factors responsible for the 'failure' or 'success' of polyandry as a marriage system rather why particular marriage succeed or fail from the backdrop of the available literatures.

**The Area of Study :** Lakhmandal is a village under Chakrata Tehsil in Dehradun District of Uttarakhand state. It is surrounded by Shillai, Kalsi, Vikasnagar and Naugaon Tehsils. This region is the part of undulating parts of Garwal Himalayas. Presence of Yamuna River gives an eminent significance to this place. This place is popular because of the famous Lakhmandal Temple of lord Shiva. According to local people, the temple and adjacent area are believed where Duryadhan of Mahabharata episode conspired to burn alive the Pandava in Lakshagriha house. This area shows connection with historical periods like Gupta, Kushana and Shunga Age.

Since the area is geographically distant so there is little ethnic mix in the village. This enable the Jaunsari to continue their traditions and customs with minimal outside influence from other groups.

## **Voices in Favour of Polyandry**

Jaunsaris claim themselves as the descendent of Pandavas of Mahabharat. The five Pandava brothers had one wife. Keeping that tradition among them, fraternal polyandry, where all brothers share one wife, is common form of marriage dynamic (Berreman 1962).

In this society, polyandrous alliances occur where a woman undergo a marriage ceremony with eldest brother of a group of brothers. This man represents the group of brothers and all of whom therefore becomes the woman's husband. Later other brothers may take subsequent wives. The eldest brother has no exclusive sexual right or reproductive right. Sexual encounters are evenly scheduled in shifts to keep fairness and peace within the brothers of household. Children produced from these marriages are all raise together in one family, not separated by each father because it is difficult to ascertain the biological paternity. Indeed, it does appear to be the preferred marriage but not the exclusive one. Monogamy, polygyny (i.e. having more than one wife) and fraternal polyandry (i.e. all the husbands are blood relatives) all are equally prevalent in Jausar Bawar region.

Westermarck (1922), who was the first to state about synchronic explanation behind the existence of polyandrous marriages in specific societies and identified a set of co-existing conditions including high sex ratio at birth, resource limitations, geographical circumscription and prolonged absence of husbands from home. Here, in this region, Polyandry is often associated with polygyny for few beneficial consequences including less land fragmentation, diversification of domestic and economic activities and lower rate of population growth (Chandra 1987, Majumdar 1962, Parmar 1975, Saksena 1962).

This form of marriage provided socioeconomic advantages in such communities in early time spectrum. Due to the extreme scarcity of cultivable land in Himalayan region, there is a common tendency among the inhabitants to prevent land fragmentation. Polyandry thereby also serves to reduce hostility between sibling brothers (Berreman 1962). It effectuates this by diminuting the number of inheritors and by keeping them together in a family around a common wife. Hence Polyandrous marriage gives rise to joint family system (Majumdar 1944). The Polyandrous marriages also work as a form of population control among Jaunsari people as if each woman has children with more than one husband means it limits the birth rate in the population.

But in present context, technological and cross-cultural inputs are making polyandrous marriages more incomprehensible. Due to modernization, contemporary lifestyles and monogamous marriage seem more appealing to younger generations. Spread of education in next generation and family planning practices are also a foremost contributing factors to the slowdown of polyandrous marriages.

## **Discussions**

Subsequent studies (Berreman 1962, Aiyappan 1937, Carasco 1959, Leach 1955, Peter 1948) have continued to stress the benefits of polyandry for both individuals and their society and have suggested that these advantages are particularly critical for economic success in resource-scarce environments. Evolutionary biology suggests that men are more likely to be dissatisfied with marriages in which their reproductive expectancies are restricted, while socio-cultural anthropology suggests that men are more likely to be dissatisfied with marriages in which their prestige is low and they have less control over their wives' sexuality (Levine and Silk 1997). Furthermore, polyandry influences the sex ratio of a population. Undoubtedly polyandry gives raise a skewed sex ratio in a population. But interestingly polyandry is related to storage of women (Heath 1955). The same depicting in polyandrous Jaunsar Bawar which has an unusual great storage of females 789 per 1000 males as compared to the nonpolyandrous areas (Berreman 1962). Nonetheless, despite the disadvantages for some participants, polyandry developed and has persisted over generations in a number of locales where it became culturally valued and integrated with other facets of the social system-the household system and the system of domestic labour organization in particular.

The present study do not specifically consider women's perspective on polyandry, this kind of practice is likely to influence female as well as male reproductive success. If having several husbands increases a woman's access to resources or influences her children's wellbeing then can be said women who marry polyandrously may actually be better off than women who marry monogamously (Crook and Crook 1988).

Even today, Indian Himalayan polyandrous societies depend on the kinship bond in polyandrous families to keep the economy intact at the sibling level. Whatever maladjustments there may be over the sharing of the common wife's sexuality or her wifehood are minimized in the interest of the success of the polyandrous union necessary for survival under harsh environmental conditions (fraternal polyandrous societies are mostly found at altitudes of 2,000 meters and above), despite the social change associated with development efforts and a shift in the economy from kind to cash,

which is reorienting minds from collectivism to individualism and introducing the notion of a joint venture at the sibling level and relations between spouses devoid of compulsory sharing (Samal et al. 1996). In contrary, Berreman (1978) demonstrated that there are no correlation between presence of polyandry and any identifiable factors among Indian Himalayan groups.

The question of why Jaunsari people are practicing polyandry has not been answered in present study, because without having the deeper understanding about speculative history we can only consider some possibilities. An interesting direction for future research would be to explore the causes of existence of polyandry in Jaunsari people by considering the combination of cultural- historical factors and to examine polyandry from female's perspective.

There is a tendency within us to quickly come to a decision and depict "weakness" and/ "failure" of any system when changes occurred in human actions from within a social organization. Even monogamy which considered as the ultimate marriage form being sometimes challenged while concepts such as living together without marriage and unwed mothers have crept in to existence. Does this mean that monogamy is failing? It is, however, reasonable for the present researchers to propose that as changing conditions make life easier and if people may discard polyandry over time in the course of the evolution of human marriage, there are still societies/sentiments/feelings with some distinct ethos about this. Ideally, understanding point of the present discussion would also aim to fuller explanations of why polyandry has declined in frequency in some places while persisting in others. One needs to examine the milieu and their interconnections within their framework rather than in isolation.

On the basis of above discussion, it may be clear that the researchers do not have any intention to judge the practice of polyandry, rather the present study is an attempt to indicate the potentialities for sensing polyandry among Jaunsari for multidimensional social research that deliberately can corroborate to the other emerging issues of social sciences.

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