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## **POLYANDRY IN LEH-LADAKH**

### **Introduction**

The people of the Himalaya have distinct economic, political, and social systems and practices (Rahul, 1970: 41). Surrounded by lofty barren mountains and beset by difficult climate conditions, Ladakh, the northernmost region in the Indian Himalaya, has a special position in the cultural and literary history of the country. Though influenced by other parts of India and Tibet, the people of Ladakh have succeeded in developing their own distinctive culture (Shakspo, 2010:1). Ladakh was an isolated place from the rest part of India till 1962. After 1962 war with China, Ladakh was linked to Srinagar by road and later from Manali too. Tourism also flourished in Ladakh after 1974 because of security reason. The coming of tourism, modern education, technologies and improved means of communication a gradual change has appeared in the life of the people of Ladakh.

Every kind of human grouping comes into being, and is maintained, through a process of recruitment by which various persons become its members. In every human family the majority of its members are recruited into it by being born into it. But before children can be born, some women (in patrilocal societies; men in matrilocal societies) must be recruited into it. A family comes into being through such a communication of spouse. Marriage is the socially recognized form of such recruitment through communication (Madan and Majumdar, 1985: 61).

A study of Ratra *et al.* (2006: 3) explains that 'Marriage is union of man (or men) and woman (or women) in a rite defined by social custom and law and carrying with it specific economic, sexual and child-care responsibilities'. This definition of marriage is very ancient which holds true even today. In other words, a marriage is a legally recognized union between a man and a woman in which they are united sexually, cooperate economically, and may give birth to, adopt or rear children. The union is assumed to be permanent although in reality it may be dissolved by separation or divorce.

Berreman (1993: 257) argues that polyandry has fascinated and challenged anthropologists from the early evolutionists to contemporary

structural-functionalists. Nowhere in the world, save perhaps Tibet, does this form of marriage and family organization occur more consistently than among the people of the mountains (the Pahari) in certain regions of the western Himalayas of north India, especially in Himachal Pradesh and northwestern Uttar Pradesh.

While defining polyandry Kapadia (1966: 52) explains that polyandry is a form of union in which a woman has more than one husband at a time, or in which brothers share a wife or wives in common. This form of union was once practiced by the peoples of the Himalayan tract in northern India and among some tribes of the pre-Dravidian groups in South India. It is supposed to have once been a trait of the Brahmanic culture from the classic instance of Draupadi having the five Pandavas of Mahabharata fame by her husband's and some vague allusions to polyandry in the Vedic mythology. Polyandry among these different groups and tribes presents different patterns and different origin and developments.

Polyandry was common among the poor, where several brothers shared one wife and worked together to support the family. This practice is common in India in some of the areas bordering Tibet (Alam 2000: 62). It was an ancient custom acquired from Tibet and adopted in Ladakh due to its remoteness and poor state (Bhasin 2006: 147). Polyandry comes to Ladakh from Tibet. The custom was borrowed from Tibet and was necessitated by economic considerations during those times. To perform marriage was also costly affair. It was unaffordable for parents to perform separate marriage for all the brothers. All the rituals and customs are performed during eldest brother's marriage. No rituals and customs are performed for other brothers. They automatically join the wedlock under polyandrous marriage with mutual consent.

Ladakhi Buddhists practice fraternal polyandry, residence is normally patrilocal and inheritance is normally patrilineal. Earlier in Ladakh due to the limited potential of agricultural land available for cultivation, the growth of population had to be kept at a low level through practice of polyandry marriage to ensure food for the surplus population particularly due to absence of other sources. Agriculture was the only source of livelihood in Ladakh for majority of the population.

Polyandry is a form of polygamy whereby a woman has several husbands. In Ladakh those husbands are often brothers, which is why it is most commonly called "Fraternal or Adelphic Polyandry". For various reasons the Ladakhis consider marrying as essential, one of the reasons being that when the parents become old, they need additional hands to look after the family and its property. The requirement is met with through marriage. The second reason for marrying is to have children who maintain the line of descent. Thirdly, the society believes that marriage regularizes sexual relations. It is

feared that there would be chaos if sex relationship is not regulated through marriage. Like Nayar of Southern India, among Ladakhi Buddhists too, there are many survivors of polyandry even today. More men are married than the women and the trend is an outcome of polyandrous system. When the eldest brother marries, the youngest brother who has to share the same wife may be very young in age. Because of this age-old practice the Ladakhis do not mind having wives older to them. Even in monogamous unions the age of the wife, in some of the cases, is more than the husband.

The present study has been conducted in the two villages where both these types of marriages are present. Among the 60 respondents majority families i.e. 55 (91.67%) were practicing monogamous marriage in which one man to one woman is the rule. Despite being abolished by law in 1941 there are 5 (8.33 %) families in which polyandry is the type of marriage in which one woman is married to two or more men and the pattern followed is fraternal that is where only two brothers (not more than two) are sharing the common wife and this was found in the five families found in the study. This clearly shows evidence that polyandry still continues in Ladakh.

Under polyandry system of marriage, land holdings are kept intact. The guiding principle behind the system of land inheritance is that it remains undivided instead of being split into smaller and smaller pieces. Polyandry has been a key factor in maintaining a relatively stable population in Ladakh over the centuries (Hodge, 1991: 58). She writes, "It might be thought that this kind of multi-partner marriage would lead to every sort of personal jealousy and rivalry, but it is not true about this kind of marriage rather they live happily and work together".

Both polyandry and inheritance by primogeniture were made illegal by the Government of Jammu and Kashmir in the early 1940s (Rizvi, 1996: 135). One of the main features of polyandry was inheritance by primogeniture which was intended to prevent fragmentation of family property. Polyandry is closely connected with the principle of keeping the property in one hand. This custom recognized the eldest brother as a sole heir to the property. The position of the remaining brothers is subordinate to the eldest brother although they do enjoy conjugal rights over the common wife. The children born of a polyandrous union call all husbands of a common wife as father, making only a distinction of elder or younger. Within the polyandrous marriage, the paternity of the children was regarded as irrelevant: all the children were accepted as being of the eldest brother, whom they addressed as 'big father', the younger brothers would be 'little fathers' (Rizvi 1996: 133).

According to Harjit Singh (1993: 270) due to environmental constraints the land that could be brought under plough was very limited. This, therefore, reduced the carrying capacity of land. It is more so because in most parts of the Ladakh only one crop in a year can be raised. It was thus important that

size of population is kept small and the fragmentation of land is checked. The latter is also important because already small land holdings if fragmented would lack economic viability.

These objectives were achieved through the polyandry system of marriage. Under the system only the eldest son in a family could marry and his two younger brothers would automatically become co-husbands of his wife. If number of sons in a family was more than three the youngest usually used to leave the family and join Gonpa (Buddhist Monastery) as Lama (Monk) (ibid).

In polyandry family, one of the husbands is mostly out of their home for almost a year. Some of them are nomads who have to go long distance to tend cattle on the pasture land from time to time they have to move. Earlier most of the Ladakhis were recruited in the army so they could come only for two-three months annually. Some of them have established business in the Leh market which is far from their native place. Under this situation, younger brother joined the wife as polyandry system of marriage. In most of the polyandry system one of the husbands is away from home be it in the army, for business purposes or the other.

While selecting a mate, after a boy attains marriageable age, he expresses the choice for a particular girl to his maternal uncle or to the parents. Maternal uncle's role in Ladakh is very important like Khasa tribe of North India during marriages. At the time of marriage, maternal uncle has to perform many roles in Ladakh. It is preferred to select the girl from the family having reasonably good social position and some landed property.

Polyandry is found to lead to fewer children to every woman, more male children and high incidence of sterility among women. We are not yet certain of the biological reasons that could explain such facts (Madan and Majumdar, 1985: 73). The cause of polyandry may be different in different society. Generally, the factors such as scarcity of women, the desire to keep the property intact, heavy bride price, poverty and sterility of men are favorable to polyandry. But in Ladakh, poverty and desire to keep property intact are more responsible for polyandry. According to Bhasin (2006: 147) it was adopted in Ladakh due to limited availability of cultivated land and poor economic condition, polyandry was adopted to control the population in view of limited resources to feed the family.

Still factors such as scarcity of women, the desire to keep the property intact, heavy bride price, poverty and sterility of men, are favorable to polyandry. Polyandry is not explicable with reference to a preponderance of men over women as posited by Westermarck. In Ladakh it was actually the women who were more in number. Among Toda, property considerations and sex-disparity explain this institution (Madan and Majumdar 1985: 72).

Polyandry is the practice of keeping more than one husband by common wife. In this system younger brother (fraternal polyandry) was mostly rated as equal level. In some cases the position of younger brother was even treated higher. On enquiring about the polygamy it was found that earlier some cases of polygyny among Ladakhi Buddhists were reported. It was practiced when a wife was unable to give birth to a child then husband could marry another wife locally known as '*Chang chung*' (Jolden, 2014: 156).

Earlier in Ladakh divorce was not so common owing to the value attached to the stability of relationship in a Ladakhi family. Even in polyandrous union there is provision for divorce. When any of the husbands feels that he cannot pull on well in a common wedlock, he can easily back out. Likewise if a common wife does not, for various reasons, like to remain wife to any of the husbands, she can easily declare her intentions and seek divorce from particular individual. Both husband and wife who get divorced can get remarried. Whenever the eldest brother, in a polyandrous family, divorces his wife, he transfers her responsibility to the next eldest. Same is the case with the younger brother if he desire so. But in such cases there has also been granted freedom to the common wife. On being divorced by the eldest husband, she may or may not like to remain as the wife of the younger one. It is not obligatory that she must remain as the wife of the younger one. Earlier in case of divorce compensation is decided by village headman and other senior member of society now they went to the court. In the past compensation value would be in the form of money as well as animals, like horse, cow, goat, sheep, etc. Now compensation value is mostly given in cash only. No compensation will be given to either of the couple when they declare divorce with mutual consent.

Some case studies were also collected to know how and what are the challenges they have to face in polyandrous family with different types and patterns. Case study is a method of analyzing the life of social unit, be it a role of an individual, a family, an institution or a community.

### **Case study 1**

Motup (name changed) is 63 years old, is an illiterate man and belongs to Buddhist community of Leh district. He lives in a joint family with his wife and five sons. Two of his sons are married, the other two had dedicated their life to religion by becoming monks and one is serving country by being part of the Indian Army (Ladakh scout). The son in army Sonam (name changed) is 25 years old and fourth in age hierarchy among his brothers and was the only unmarried son.

After some years of his eldest brother's marriage Sonam had established relations with the wife of his eldest brother as a polyandrous wedlock. This was known only to the brother's wife and later to his eldest brother

as well. Parents and other relatives were unaware that Sonam was having polyandrous relation with his eldest brother's wife.

When his parents started to look for suitable girl for Sonam, at that time the eldest brother's wife got to know the marriage plans for Sonam. She did not agree for his marriage, because of their relationship. She objected to this decision and told her in-laws that he was in polyandrous relationship with her as well as was the father of her youngest son. She said she will not accept his marriage to another woman and the parents had no option but to accept her. As Sonam could not marry another girl because of the polyandrous relationship both the brothers had decided to live with her as well as with the parents.

This shows that polyandrous relations are sometimes kept secrets, not known to others even to the parents. In this kind of polyandrous marriage, where younger brother who joined the wed-lock sometimes promised to look after the child and to bear all the expenses of the youngest son, is accepted by Ladakhi society. For the outsiders it is very difficult to identify polyandry of this kind. Under polyandrous marriage younger brother cannot marry another woman without the consent of elder brother's wife with whom he is in polyandrous relation.

### **Case study 2**

Phungtsog (name changed) is 27 years old and is a student. Phungtsog's grand-father named Tashi (name changed) was married to a woman under virilocal ('*Pagma*' in which groom goes to bride's house) marriage system. After two years of their marriage his younger brother named Angchok joined them under polyandrous marriage which was fraternal polyandry. According to respondent reason for polyandrous marriage is to keep the property intact as well as poverty. Earlier people of Ladakh were poor as they totally depended upon agriculture which was also for self-consumption which is the reason for keeping the property intact. People were mostly illiterate during those days modern education was not completely implemented in the villages.

Phungtsog's father Wangyal married under uxorilocal ('*Makpa*' in which groom goes to bride's house) marriage system. He got married to the younger sister of the family and after a year was joined by her elder sister making it a polygynous marriage in which marriage of one man takes place with two or more women. Where the women involved are sisters it is termed as sororal polygyny which is very rare among Ladakhi Buddhists. The reason behind the sororal polygyny in this case was to keep the property intact rather than to divide the property into parts. The reason was poverty and to keep the property intact same as in the polyandry but the type of marriage was different.

Phungtsog likes neither polyandry marriage (grand-father's type) nor polygyny (father's type). Phungtsog wants to have a monogamous marriage in which one man marries one woman.

Thus this was a case in which three generations were following three different kinds of marriages thus indicating the change that has come in Leh district over the years among the Buddhists regarding marriages.

### Conclusion

With the abolition of polyandry in Ladakh by Government of Jammu and Kashmir and the application of Hindu Succession Act to the Buddhists of Ladakh, the right of inheritance was protected giving equal right to all the brothers of their parents' property, and thus promoting the monogamous marriage system in Ladakh.

Polyandry in Ladakh is still in practice among Buddhists. In Ladakh like many cultural traits, ancient custom of polyandry was also acquired from Tibet. Earlier it was practiced because of poverty now it is practice to keep the family property intact under the polyandry system of marriage. It has also come to light that in most of the cases one of the husbands is away from home especially in the Indian army. It was not only to keep the property intact but also the factors like Law of primogeniture, lack of agricultural land and climate of the region which are responsible for polyandry marriages in Ladakh. Polyandry marriage is different in different families like in some cases it is secretly done. Polyandry is also not hereditary in nature (not inherited down the generation) sometimes there are different types of marriages within in one family.

**Table 3.1**  
**Types of Marriage**

Types	No. of households	Percentage (%)
1. Monogamous	55	91.67
2. Polygamy (Polyandry)	05	8.33
Total	60	100

Sources: Data have been gathered through fieldwork

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