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A Polyandrous Society in transition:

A CASE STUDY OF JAUN SAR-BAWAR



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Abstract

Man being a social animal cannot survive alone and has therefore been living in groups or communities called families for ages. How these 'families' come about through the institution of marriage or any other way is rather an elaborate and an arduous notion. India along with its diverse people and societies offers innumerable ways by which people unite to come together as a family. Polyandry is one such way that has been prevalent in various regions of the sub-continent evidently among the Paharis of Himachal Pradesh, the Todas of Nilgiris, Nairs of Travancore and the Ezhavas of Malabar. While polyandrous unions have disappeared from the traditions of many of the groups and tribes, it is still practiced by some Jaunsaris—an ethnic group living in the lower Himalayan range—especially in the JaunsarBawar region of Uttarakhand. The concept of polyandry is so vast and mystifying that people who have just heard of the practice or the people who even did an in-depth study of it are confused in certain matters regarding it. This thesis aims at providing answers to many questions arising in the minds of people who have little or no knowledge of this subject. In this paper we have tried to find out why people follow this tradition and whether or not it has undergone transition. Also its various characteristics along with its socio-economic issues like the state and position of women in such a society and how the economic balance in a polyandrous family is maintained has been looked into. After conducting the field work, many facets have been found which determine the band or tribe to be polyandrous. The majority of these societies are egalitarian bands or tribes practicing slash and burn agriculture. The studied tribe has been practicing polyandry as they believe they are the descendants of the Pandavas from the Hindu mythological epic Mahabharata and should continue the tradition their forefathers started. They deny the role of a skewed sex-ratio in favour of males as a possible reason for them practicing this unusual tradition. The presence of polyandry among these groups suggests that polyandry in all likelihood existed throughout human evolutionary history.

Table of Contents

- i. Introduction
- ii. Methodology
- iii. Demography
- iv. Culture, ancestry and language
- v. Marriage patterns and rules
- vi. Women in Jaunsar-Bawar
- vii. Polyandry and its related factors
- viii. Monogamy
- ix. Major changes in polyandry
- x. Discussion
- xi. Conclusion
- xii. References

Introduction

Polyandry as a practice considered different and atypical from what the mainstream society observes has always captivated the minds of social scientists. Polyandry in India has been studied extensively by many sociologists and anthropologists like Gerald Berreman, D.N. Majumdar and George P. Murdock among many others. The most common form of polyandry practiced is fraternal polyandry wherein a woman has multiple husbands who are co-resident brothers. In other words, all the brothers share a common wife.

The fraternal polyandry of Jaunsar-Bawar in the western Himalayas of India is described by examining the domestic groups it creates. The form and composition of these groups vary within the society so that structures commonly associated with the terms monogamy, polygyny, and group marriage, as well as polyandry and polygyny, occur simultaneously in any community and, over time, in many families. All are manifestations of a single set of principles and beliefs about the nature of marriage, family, and the domestic group. The variations are the result of changes in family composition during its life cycle (the developmental cycle) and in response to circumstantial and optional factors. Generalizations about polyandry, its causes and consequences, can only apply to this society if they encompass the temporal and situational diversity of the domestic group. The developmental cycle of the domestic group explains most of the intra-cultural variation in the Pahari family (Berreman 2009).

George P. Murdock's *Ethnographic Atlas* (1967) classifies only four societies, out of 1167, as polyandrous: the Tibetans, the Todas of India, the Sherpa of Nepal, and the Marquesans of Polynesia. Despite other mentions of polyandry throughout the literature (Westermarck 1926, Prince Peter 1963, Berreman 1962, and many others), over the last six decades these four groups have been touted countless times in anthropological textbooks and other publications as the only four societies in the world to allow polyandry. This thesis aims at disproving these misconceptions and shows that polyandry is found not just among these communities but also among other tribes of India. It will bring out the reasons as to why this particular Jaunsari community practices this tradition and deal in length their peculiar and unique customs.

Most marriages around the world occur to establish a union of a male and a female wherein the male enjoys monopoly over the wife's sexuality, domestic and other labours and property and also gives exclusive rights to the wife in the husband's income, his sexuality and property. It gives both the husband and the wife to claim a right to any children they bear. This thesis shows that this is always not the case. In a fraternally polyandrous family, no single man or a brother has monopolistic rights in his wife's sexuality. Since all brothers share a common wife, no single brother can claim sole right to have sexual relations her. Also, the property is held in common ownership among the brothers and no child solely belongs to a particular father. Therefore this thesis shows that not all cultures share the same social, economic and legal rules.

Furthermore, a major reason behind this study was to observe any transition this practice has undergone. Society as we know it has been constantly changing with new norms and values creeping in and at the same time few old ones being flushed out.

“By social change is meant only such alterations as occur in social organisation that is the structure and function of society”. – Kinsley Davis

Thus, social change is alteration in the social structure and social relationship in a society. So, change is natural for every society. To start with, previous studies of polyandry bring to light that this rare tradition has been fading into oblivion. Our motive was to find out whether the polyandrous

society of JaunsarBawar too had been waning; and if so, in which way and under what circumstances.

In another dimension, earlier reports of polyandry have looked past the state of women in such societies. Even if they have reported the presence of women in such societies, it has been done just to show the role of women in the institution of polyandrous marriages. Their physical and emotional state has been neglected or has not been studied in great detail. This thesis offers the readers an opportunity to look into the life and minds of women of a polyandrous society.

Defining Polyandry

The term polyandry is derived from two Greek words “*poly*” meaning “many” and “*andros*” meaning “man”. Cassidy and Lee (1989) define it as the simultaneous marriage of one woman to more than one man. Although a great deal of contention has arisen about what exactly constitutes marriage in a polyandrous society (Westermarck 1926, Murdock 1949, Gough 1959, Prince Peter 1963), the standard definition of polyandry has remained more or less the same over time, as stated by Cassidy and Lee (1989). Levine and Sangree (1980) mention the different types of polyandry. They define fraternal or adelphic polyandry as a practice where co-resident brothers jointly marry a single woman in only one wedding and later form a single household. Associated polyandry may or may not include men who are brothers or other close male relatives, and is different from fraternal polyandry because the marriage always begins monogamously and additional husbands are incorporated into the pre-existing union later on. Non-fraternal polyandry refers to a polyandrous union in which the husbands are not related in any way.

Levine and Sangree (1980) also discuss the practice of “*cicisbeism*”, which they define as “extramarital liaisons,” and distinguish it from polyandry. The term *cicisbeism* comes from the Italian word for lover, “*cicisbeo*”, and may be used to describe either male or female infidelity; however, it is commonly used throughout the classical literature to describe female behaviour. The classical authors (Murdock 1949, Prince Peter 1963) are also in agreement that this practice of taking lovers while married should not be classified as polyandry. Murdock (1949) said that only families in which the female is engaged in a socially sanctioned, culturally patterned marriage, which involves economic cooperation, residential cohabitation, and sexual rights with more than one man simultaneously may be considered polyandrous.

For the purposes of this study, polyandry (fraternal) can be defined as an union through marriage in which a woman is married into a family of two or more co-resident brothers who commonly enjoy her sexuality and commonly bear the responsibility, legal or otherwise, of any children born into that union.

Methodology

In our small field study, we had chosen JaunsarBawar as the target area, a sub-division of Dehradun. Ethnically, Jaunsar-Bawar comprises two regions, inhabited by the two predominant groups: 'Jaunsar', the lower half, while the snow-clad upper region is called 'Bawar'. The Jaunsaris or Paharis (of the mountain) was the research population of our study. The objectives of this research and their aspects have been studied in two villages namely Matiyawa and Mohana situated in the Chakrata block of Dehradun district in Uttarakhand which were chosen through purposive sampling. Matiyawa was the primary village and Mohana was studied in order to get a comparative understanding of the polyandrous patterns prevalent in the region. A primary household level survey was conducted. Data

was collected by using the technique of interview-schedule, observation and from secondary sources i.e., personal and public documents. The following table shows the number of people studied:

Males	27
Females	19
Literates	13
Children (aged 9-12)	2
Aged (above 50)	15
Total people studied	46

The motive behind choosing Matiyawa and Mohana was that Matiyawa has a sex-ratio of 770 females per 1000 males and Mohana has a sex-ratio of 900 females per 1000 males. The aim was to determine whether a skewed sex-ratio in favour of males was a reason behind polyandry in the region. Also, Matiyawa, being situated atop a hill and hardly accessible and Mohana being an easily accessible village could provide comprehensible answers to the hypotheses that were: Is the polyandrous society of JaunsarBawar undergoing transition? And if so, why and how? It would be easier to study whether the transition that occurred in the society depended on the proximity of the region to urban areas.

Demography

Matiyawa, a village atop a hill with narrow mountainous access paths is situated about 104 km north of Dehradun. Its people are called Jaunsaris or Paharis which means ‘of the mountains’ and speak the Jaunsari language. The script of the language is still in the process of formulation. The entire population is Hindu and 69 percent of it belongs to the Jaunsari tribe (a recognized Scheduled Tribe). 30 percent of the population are Schedule Castes. The main occupation is terrace farming. The people use the techniques of slash-and-burn cultivation and crop rotation. The majority Jaunsari tribe look down upon and discriminate against the minority Schedule Castes. The latter are considered impure and are not usually socialized with.

	Matiyawa	Mohana
Number of households	28	157
Total population	285	1135
Males	155	604
Females	130	531
Sex ratio (per 1000 males)	770	900
Literacy rate (%)	58	54
Workers (%)	55	40

Table 1: Comparison of demographic data of Matiyawa and Mohana as per District Census Handbook, Dehradun, U.K. 2011

Culture, ancestry and language

The people of Matiyawa and other Jaunsaris consider themselves to be the descendants of the Pandavas from the Hindu epic—the Mahabharata. In this epic, princess Draupadi is married to the eldest of the five heroic Pandav brothers, *Yudhishthir* but the other four brothers share her sexuality too. As mentioned in the epic, the five brothers along with Draupadi, when banished from their kingdom for thirteen years, spent their last year hiding in the hilly terrain of Kinnaur which is now in Himachal Pradesh. Since the Pandavas themselves practiced polyandry, the Paharis believe it is right

to follow in the footsteps of their ancestors. They call the practice “*Pandav Pratha*” meaning “tradition of the Pandavas”.

Case Study 1:

In yet another chronicle about their origin, **Madan DeenDayal**, a 30 year-old resident of Matiyawa narrates that they were the descendants of the *Nagvanshis*— belonging to the clan of snakes—who later migrated to Uttarakhand from Rajasthan. The legend was that the *Nagvanshis* were resistant to snake bites. Even if a person was bitten by a snake, he would bleed a little but the venom would not affect him. This power/supernatural ability, however, had certain rules and guidelines which had to be followed by the people for them to be resilient against snake venoms. Overtime, some people broke these rules and the ‘blessing’ upon the clan lifted.

DeenDayal also said considering the statement that they lead a life different from urban life does not necessarily mean that development and facilities of the cities has not reached this place. Matiyawa has a primary school where almost all the children are encouraged to go. But he told us that the teacher do not come here every day to teach because of the roads and lack of transportation.

Although Matiyawa doesn’t have proper roads leading up to the village, the rest of Jaunsar Bawar is well linked through a network of roads. Most of the young boys in Matiyawa wear denims and T-shirts and not their traditional attire which is a *kurta* and a *pajama*. When asked the reason behind it, he says that they watch it in the movies and TV soaps. The traditional wear for women is a *dhantu* or a head scarf, *jhangu* or a shirt and *ghagra* or a long skirt. However, only married women wear the traditional attire whereas an unmarried woman or a girl wears *salwar-kameez*.



Madan DeenDayal is however sceptical about development in the region. He says,

“Development is just an overrated product which the government sells and we buy it in return for votes. Although the other villagers and I face difficulty commuting up and down from here, I wish the roads are never built. Good roads will lead many people from the towns and cities here for various reasons. This will dilute our traditions and folk-ways. I wish I never see such infiltration.”

Every household owns mules and other cattle. The mules are used as a means for transporting goods and raw materials. In Matiyawa, it is easy for any outsider to be shocked upon seeing every house made of bricks, stones and cement. Most houses even have huge television sets, a refrigerator and many other electronics.

Madan DeenDayal was our first respondent. When we asked him about polyandry in the village, he totally denied the practice of polyandry. He said there were families ten years before. Then he said his parents used to follow this tradition. His father has four brothers and two wives; one wife for every two brothers. The second wife was brought in because the age difference between Madan's father Gopal (eldest brother) and his third brother was very high. They all live together as a family. In cases where there are multiple wives, the eldest wife or the wife who was first married into the family, has a senior and a more authoritative position over the other wives.

Two or more wives are brought in if a brother wishes to remarry, if there is a great age difference between the eldest and the youngest brother or if the first wife is sterile. If a brother wishes to marry another woman, he is allowed to do so but is first dissuaded from doing so because they believe that it will cause a rift in the family and also in the family property. The marriage ceremony again takes place for the brother to be wed.

This says that polyandry among the Jaunsaris have undergone few changes; one of them being the multiplicity of wives, which D.N. Majumdar termed as "polygynandry". But it is difficult to say whether there is a practice of polygynandry today or not, because he said that nowadays everyone have monogamous marriages.



The entire village is self-subsistent with everyone owning land and growing crops. They grow potatoes, red kidney beans, tomatoes, *arbi* (taro root) and chillies among many others which are even exported to nearby and far-off cities like Dehradun and New Delhi. The local cuisine there is 'Dahi-Aska' (also called *kaprori*) and 'Pinwa' although their daily diet consists of roti (Indian bread) cooked in *ghee* (clarified butter) and vegetables. Another delicacy which is an indispensable part of their meal is the chutney made from '*chullu*' (a wild berry found in those mountains). The people also have a weakness for dairy products. Almost every household possesses goats and cows which sustains their need for milk, *ghee* and even *paneer*(Indian cheese).

Marriage patterns and rules

It is not unknown to us the magnitude and portion of an Indian's life that is governed and driven by religion. The Jaunsaris too are no exception. They are a religious lot and pray to their clan deity—*Mahsu-devta*. *Mahsudevta* is an incarnation of the Hindu God, *Shiva*. The important festivals are *Bissu* (harvest season), *Magh-Mela*, Diwali and Dussehra.



The Mahsudevta temple in Matiyawa

Although the Jaunsaris are Hindus, their marriage customs and rituals are a little different from the customs of mainstream Hinduism. Marriage, for both boys and girls take place at an early age of about 12-14 years whereas the betrothal often takes place at an even tender age, even when the child is a year old, by mutual agreements between the parents. Villagers, however, says that this has changed over the years due to education. They now observe the legal age for marriage. It is mostly because the girls and boys go off to the cities to complete their education and find a job. The Jaunsaris of Matiyawa practice village exogamy and all the children in the village share a sibling relationship. Marriage within the same village is considered a taboo.

Case Study 2:

Vikrama, a girl of 20 and our host explains to us that when a girl comes of age, a suitable boy from a nearby village is chosen to be her husband. The suitability criteria usually is that the boy should own a plot of land where he could cultivate and provide for the family. Girls are chosen on the basis that she should be able to cook and work in the fields as a helping hand to her husband. When there is agreement on both sides, the boy's father accompanied by two people, preferably elders, from the boy's village go to the girl's village and give the girl's father a small amount of money (customarily it is one rupee) which is called '*jeodhan*' or bride price. This ceremony is called '*suhaag lagana*'. The boy's father is then shown the herd of goats which the girl's family owns and the former selects a few goats from the herd which are then slaughtered for the feast. The date of the marriage is then decided upon. This ceremony is to make sure that the girl and the boy are now bound to each other. Even if the girl's father wishes to marry her someplace else, he cannot do so without returning the *jeodhan*. She also told us that dowry was absent among the Jaunsaris but bride price is the rule. The bride (*jojolty*) however brings some jewellery and necessary pots and pans including a '*chattai*' (mat) from her natal home.

She delineates that on the day of the marriage ceremony, the girl's family along with the entire village go to the boy's village for observing the rites and rituals. This is a custom different from that of a Hindu marriage because among almost all Hindu sects, the boy's family come to the girl's place.

The entire village on the boy's side get together and partake in the celebrations. Everyone wears colourful new clothes and participates in cooking. The girls and women are usually involved in making the *rotis* and rice whereas the men make the curry. Goats twice the number the bride's father had slaughtered are slaughtered by the groom's family. The groom's family incurs more expenses than the bride's family, a custom again in contrast to the customs of the mainstream Hindus.

From the above, we can say that there is unity among the villagers. Celebrating every occasion together, even marriages in the village. She also narrates how marriages take place in the villages.

She says, marriage ceremony which is called '*roini jimaro ka jojoda*' takes place in front of the sacred fire and in the presence of a priest who recites sacred texts from the *Bhagvad Gita* and the *Upanishads*. The ritual is completed with the boy applying vermilion on the girl's forehead, tying the *mangalsutra* (sacred thread) around her neck and circumambulating the fire seven times. The girl then remains in the boy's village which is now to be her home whereas the rest of her village return back after enjoying all the delicacies served. She takes on the surname 'Devi' which all married women are supposed to do and is called '*rhanti*'.

On asked about polyandry, hesitated **Vikrama** told us that the girl is married to the eldest son but is expected to consider all his younger brothers as her husbands irrespective of the number. In other words, she is wife of all the brothers. Even though she is the wife of all the brothers, the marriage ceremony takes place just once with the eldest brother. In a Jaunsari family, more importance is given when the eldest son is getting married than it is given when a daughter gets married.

Case study 3:

When asked, **Meena Devi**, aged 23, a woman married to two brothers and a mother of three, told us hesitatingly that no single brother can have a sole monopolistic claim over his wife's sexuality. He cannot decide with whom among the brothers she can have sexual relations with. A question then arises: when do the other brothers have sexual intercourse with the wife?

Meena narrates,

"I sleep with the younger brother during the day when my eldest husband is working in the fields. Also whenever my eldest husband goes to the city to sell his produce, I share the other brother's bed".

On further questioning about whether she likes both the brothers equally, she replies,

"It's not up to us, the women, whether we can choose whom to have sexual intercourse with. It is our *reet* (tradition) and I gladly follow it. But if I refuse to have sex with any brother, my mother-in-law would make me understand and coerce me into it if still refuse. Personally I don't fancy the idea but like I said it is our tradition. It would be nice if I had just one husband and I wouldn't have to share my love."

When asked what aspect of this tradition she dislikes, she answers,

"To begin with, now-a-days one hears so much about sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS; you never know which of the brothers might be infected. Also, some brothers are rough and I am forced even if I don't want to have intercourse with them."

Meena did not shy away from answering our next question on identification of the children. Though it did not matter who is the biological father of the child, but she says her mother-in-law keep tracts of their monthly menstrual cycle and with whom she had slept after her menstrual cycle.

Bowing to our curiosity we ask whether there have been any cases where a man has tried to claim sole 'ownership' to a wife who was shared by a group of brothers. We mostly got negative responses

until Gambhir Singh Chauhan, who owns the only grocery store in the area enlightens us about an incident where the younger brother eloped with one of the two wives.

Case study 4:

Gambhir Singh goes on to say,

“These days it’s not a new thing. Many young boys and girls are eloping. It’s the women. They are ‘characterless’; without any morals. They entrap our sons and leave with them to live an easy life elsewhere. They don’t think about us, the rest of the family. They are the ones who are destroying our tradition.”

Our next question was on women and female foeticide. He said they respect women and consider them as ‘Devi’. He said female foeticide never happened in their village. They allow their girl child to study and work wherever they like. And unlike in other parts of the country, we do not have dowry system.

Although Mr. Gambhir told us that he and his brother have their own wives, it is difficult to believe him because of his comments on polyandry and how he felt offended when women elopes to escape from the system of polyandry. And the way he reacted to the elopement case, the respect of women is to be questioned.

Case study 5:

Dharam Chauhan, aged 24, is pursuing LLB and has four fathers and a mother. When we first went to his house and asked him about polyandry in his family, he denied. He said there are families in the village who practise polyandry but not his.

While our visit to his house, we observed that there were only males and a woman in the house. And what was more interesting was that she was taking care of all of them. So this scene forced us to meet him and his family again. His family is the wealthiest family in the village. Our next meeting did not go in vain. He finally accepted it, albeit hesitatingly. He told us that he call all of them “papa” and accepted the tradition. But when asked about his marriage, he said he would like have a monogamous marriage.

When any children are born, they consider all the husbands of the mother as their fathers and call them ‘papa’ or ‘baba’. All the brothers equally bear the responsibility of the children.

But what if one brother decides to break tradition and form a nuclear family and claim rights over a child? In such a case, he says paternity may be assigned by mother’s designation (she is supposed to assign paternity to the first husband who had sexual relations with her after her last menstruation prior to the child’s conception), or by order of birth (whereby the eldest child is attributed to the eldest father, second child to next-eldest father, and so on in a sequence which rotates back to the eldest father to begin again if the number of children exceeds the number of fathers). Physical resemblance between a child and a particular father may also be a basis for assigning paternity.

Even if there are, they call it ‘choot’ meaning ‘separation’, divorces rarely take place. In case a woman wishes to separate or marry someone outside her marital family, she is allowed to do so. She is then given *choot* or the freedom to go under the condition that her parents or her new husband pays compensation in the form of money to her former husbands. She does not get any alimony and her expenses are then borne by her natal family. Also, she has to leave behind all the ornaments she

had brought with her after marriage for the husbands' family. She also does not get the custody of any children. Children remain with their father or his family when a marriage dissolves. If a husband dies, the woman observes a short mourning period (1 day) and then again applies vermilion and goes on living as the wife of the other brothers. This form of levirate marriage is seen among all Jaunsaris. During the mourning period, the woman takes off all adornments which symbolizes her as a married lady like 'sindur' (vermilion), bangles and coloured clothes.

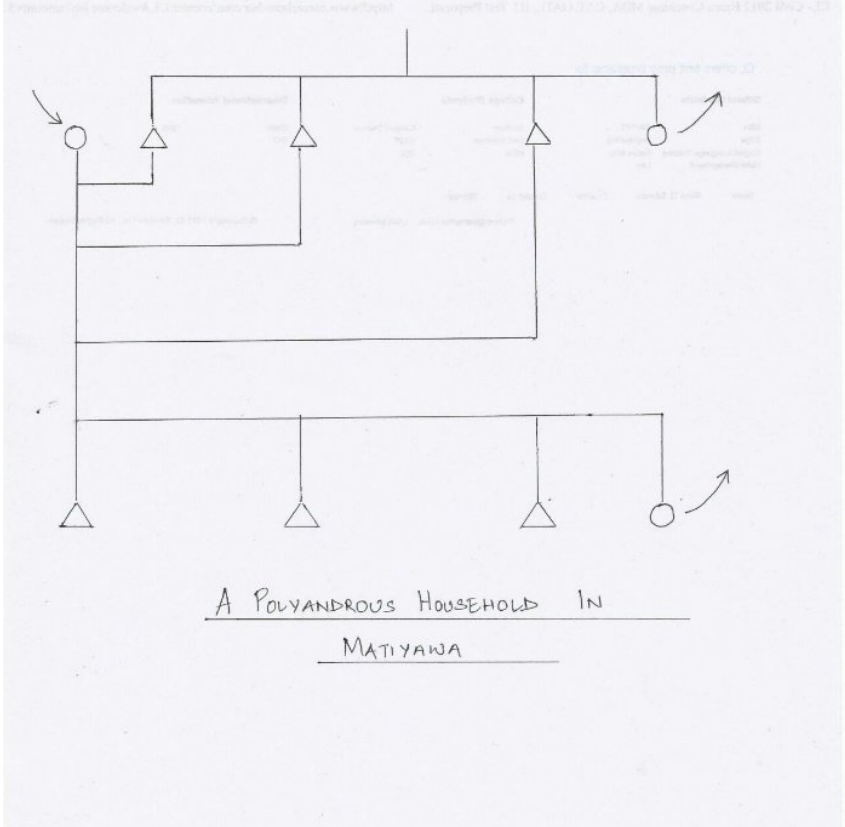


Figure 1

Figure 1 is the pedigree chart of a polyandrous family in Matiyawa in which the household comprises three brothers and a daughter. The daughter is married into a similar polyandrous family of another village whereas another girl from some other village is brought into this household to be the common wife of all the three brothers. The brothers then collectively share the responsibility of the four children born into the union.

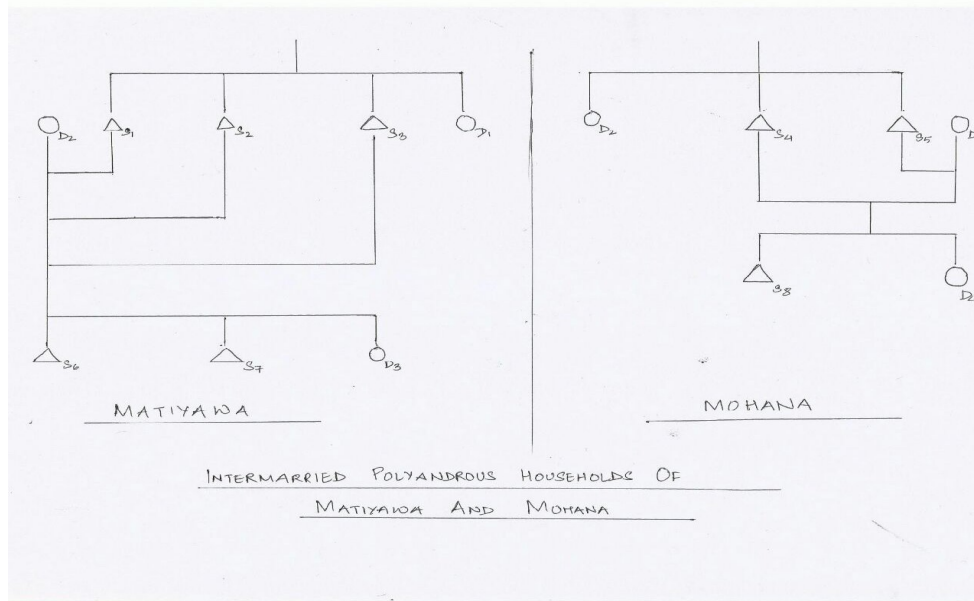


Figure 2

Figure 2 is the pedigree chart of two families, one from Matiyawa and the other from Mohana who exchanged women in the first generation. The daughter D_1 from the household in Matiyawa is married into the household of Mohana in which the brothers S_4 and S_5 share her sexuality which in return married its daughter D_2 to the brothers S_1 , S_2 and S_3 of the household of Matiyawa. The children born into the former household are S_8 and D_4 , and the children born in the latter are S_6 , S_7 and D_3 .

Women in Jaunsar-Bawar

The reason that the role of women in this thesis has its own section is that in earlier accounts of polyandry women of such societies were not given due importance and their role was rather neglected. In Matiyawa there are no instances of any female foeticides or the preference of a boy child over a girl child but the natives feel that a boy child is necessary to prevent the lineage from fading into extinction. Based on our observations and the responses we received from the natives of Matiyawa, the state of women there can be understood as follows.

Women in Jaunsar-Bawar are considered as economic assets for a family because of two main reasons. Firstly, when a daughter is married the family receives bride price. Secondly, women contribute as heavily as men in the fields to provide for their subsistence as well as to generate income. Thus, an additional wife can be more beneficial as it means labour and more income. A family of three or four brothers with modest land-holdings (four to five acres) might be most likely to have one or two wives, while a family of one man or two brothers with an equal amount of land might have two to four wives. Families with less land would generally have fewer wives. Families without land at all would have less incentive to acquire multiple wives, for in such cases women's work is primarily household work that can be handled by one or two women.

The condition of women in a polyandrous society can sometimes be despicable. In such a union, the sexual, economic and reproductive services of a woman to be used by a group of men are bought by paying bride price to her family. This "commodifies" her and no less than designates her position as an object of trade. She is treated as an object with an exchange-value and a use-value and a woman

with a higher value is sought after. Elaborating on the sexual services she provides, she is to share her sexuality with her husband and all the brothers even if she wishes otherwise. And when she refuses to have sexual intercourse with any brother, she is accused of bringing shame to her family. Many a times, the husbands divorce one of the wives in order to get compensation from her family or allow her new husband to pay for her. This trivializes her position in comparison to men in society.

Not only does she work in the fields, fetch water and supply fodder for cattle, she is entrusted with household work and with the task of raising and rearing of children. The day for a woman begins at wee hours of the morning when she fetches water from distant water-holes and springs. Then she cooks and cleans for the family before leaving for the fields. In the fields she sows during the sowing season, removes weeds, breaks up clods of earth and reaps the harvest during the harvesting season. She then takes off to steep slopes of the mountainous forests to cut grass for the cattle and returns in the evening to again cook supper. Her day doesn't end there because she has to meet the sexual demands of the brothers too. She has to be omnipresent and excel in all tasks she undertakes.

Sanitation is another issue. Still forced to defecate and bathe in the open due to lack of toilets and bathing enclosures only add to the misery of women. Women usually wake up early or complete the task late at night as there is a strong taboo associated with defecation and bathing in view of others. Especially if a village elder or a person with whom she shares an avoidance relationship (which limits direct personal contact and maintains an extreme degree of respect between certain categories of people, for example, daughter-in-law and father-in-law) sees her in such state, she is accused of embarrassing the family.

Another problem which women face in Matiyawa is during childbirth. Since the hospital is far away, the closest one being in Chakrata, and the treacherous mountain paths being another concern a woman on the verge of a delivery face great problems. On such occasions, usually the 'dai' (mid-wife) assists in childbirth but in complicated matters the lives of both the mother and the unborn child are at great risk.

Polyandry and its related factors

➤ Economic factors

Most households in Matiyawa have their own plot of land where they practice terrace cultivation. The ownership of these lands in the mountains of Jaunsar Bawar are not precisely legitimate as there are no records of it in government offices. They acquire these lands solely for purposes of agriculture and there is no written proof that they own these lands, that is to say, if a person from Matiyawa wishes to sell his land to a person from another place like Dehradun, he cannot do so. There will be no value of this land in Dehradun. However buying and selling of land within the nearby Jaunsari villages takes place. Almost every family in Matiyawa has a '*chaoni*' or shed where they tend and keep their cattle used for farming. The village lands can be distributed into three sub-divisions: (1) the upper reaches which consist of forests and pastures, where they maintain their *chaoni* or cattle-sheds during summer; (2) the middle sub-region formed by dry, gentle sloping land which is cultivated by terracing; and (3) the lower sub-region in the valley near the banks of a stream where they maintain their irrigated fields. The men leave their houses in the early morning to work in the fields and their cattle-sheds whereas the women join in the afternoon when they cut grass for the cattle, fetch water and help in weeding. The work of the men is more labour-intensive such as ploughing, watering the fields, etc. Property, for the Jaunsaris pretty much consists of just a few acres of land and some cattle.

The economic advantage of polyandry is that it helps to keep the family property and income intact. This proves more beneficial if the family is poor as the all the brothers can pool their income and collectively pay for the family's expenses. "Polyandry thereby also serves to reduce potential hostility between sibling brothers. Without polyandry there would be a tendency for children of brothers to break up the joint family in order that each group of siblings might pursue its own economic interests" (Berreman 1962). The brothers give all their earnings to the eldest brother who then decides when and where money is to be spent. Since the ratio of earners to non-earners in a polyandrous household is greater, polyandry proves advantageous again in this aspect. If any economic disputes arise within the family, the elder brother settles it. If he is unable to do so, the matter is taken to the *mukhia*(head) of the village. If any brother wants his own share of property and wishes to relocate and start a different family, he is dissuaded at first but if he is adamant he gets his share of the property which is called '*nikaasi*'. And if the property is to be divided among all the brothers, the eldest and the youngest brother gets a greater share than the other brothers. For example, if there are four brothers then the property is divided into five and a half shares. The eldest brother gets two shares, the second and the third brother get one share each and the youngest brother gets one-and-a-half share of the property.

➤ Social factors

Polyandry has its social advantages too. If a husband is absent or away for a long period of time maybe because the field is far from the house or for any other reasons, the other brothers can provide protection for the wife and the children.

Another function of polyandry is that it helps to keep intra-familial harmony and unity. Since all the brothers share a common wife there are less quarrels among the brothers. Most joint families all over India break down due to the friction among the wives in which the husbands support their respective wives. This factor is eliminated in a polyandrous household.

Women in a polyandrous family are not widowed even if a brother dies and has someone who can still provide for her financially, emotionally and sexually. Even if one brother dies, she is still the wife of the husband's sibling.

Additionally polyandry has another fundamental function which is the joint responsibility of the children. Polyandry helps in the better rearing and raising of children as they inherit from all the fathers and can relate to more than one paternal figures.

➤ Demographic factors

In most works on polyandry, the possibility of a skewed sex-ratio in favour of males has been discussed explaining that a skewed sex-ratio has been a prime causal factor for polyandry. This thesis contradicts this hypothesis. The sex-ratios of both Matiyawa and Mohana which are 770/1000 and 900/1000 respectively indicate that this is certainly not the case. Even if in some places skewed sex-ratio in favour of males might be a reason for polyandry, it is not the only reason. Other reasons like following in the footsteps of their ancestors, the Pandavas who were polyandrous and those reasons mentioned above together contribute to a tribe or a community being polyandrous. Also the neighbouring Garhwal region, where there is a surplus of women have abundant accounts of polyandrous families. Therefore, a skewed sex-ratio factor is not necessarily the cause for polyandry.

Monogamy

Monogamy in Jaunsar-Bawar although not the preferred form of marriage, is unavoidable in certain situations. There arises certain situation when polyandry cannot be an option and the family has to opt for monogamy.

“Non-polyandrous marriages almost always are the outcome of chance factors, not choice.” (Levine 1987).

Monogamy is unavoidable when a household raises only one son to adulthood or has no sons. The first case is self-explanatory but in cases where there are no sons, the daughter is married into a household with one or several sons.

Major changes in polyandry

Change is an inevitable and indispensable component in the course of human evolution, be it social, economic or political. Societies change; new ones are shaped and sometimes old ones immaterialized. Whereas at times the whole of the society undergoes change, sometimes one or two aspects of it gets a makeover. The degree and the domain of change varies differently among different societies. Studying of these changes is essential as it provides an understanding and helps in constructing the structure of the past and simultaneously presents an insight of what the future of the society concerned might look like. It offers an opportunity to evaluate and understand what the society is capable of.

Polyandry in the JaunsarBawar region too has not escaped transition. The primary change that has been noted is the shift from polyandrous marriages to monogamy. Accounts of polyandrous households are getting scarcer each day and only a handful of families exist which still practice polyandry. And even among those handful, the only polyandrous union are of the older generations. The question that arises here is that what has caused this change. The answer to this is akin to those reasons which triggers change in every social institution. The role of education and the media, infrastructural development and acculturation are factors which have contributed to this change.

- Role of education: The Jaunsaris were an illiterate tribe of people living in the remoteness and inaccessibility of the Himalayas until the mid-20th century. The first and only primary school in Matiyawa was established in 1967. This caused the people to send their children including girls, to school. These boys and girls then went to places in the plains and valleys like Dehradun for higher education. This enabled them to procure government jobs in all sectors, although their primary occupation remains agriculture. The major change occurred after the area was declared as a Schedule Tribe region in 1967. The declaration gave them reserved seats in higher educational institutions and government jobs which became an encouragement for the people as it was a better source of income for the family devoid of the hassles associated with agriculture.

Children who went for higher studies outside their village learnt about the monogamous practices of the majority population which influenced their individual marital choices. Also, they preferred monogamy because of the social stigma attached with polyandry. Children from polyandrous families were often met with ridicule and humiliation. These factors changed their perceptions.

Case study 6:

Janaki, the younger sister of our host, Vikrama, studies at a school in Vikasnagar, a township situated 45 kilometres away from Matiyawa. On asking her she coyly answers that she would not marry into a polyandrous household.

“I may have two fathers but I will not have two husbands. It’s not that I am ashamed of my peoples’ tradition but it’s the pressure of handling more than one husband. I’ve seen my mother struggle; I know she is happy and both my fathers love my sister and me but I don’t think I will be able to handle it.”

People who now worked in government jobs lived away from their polyandrous customs and thereby adopted the monogamous practices of the mainstream population. It was easier for them to live in nuclear families and provide individually for the children.

Additionally, several NGOs started operating in these regions like the *Sankalp Yuva Samiti* in Matiyawa and educated them about the ills of polyandry and merits of monogamy. They looked after the overall educational development of the children and young adults.



- **Role of media:** Media in the form of television and radios has found a concrete place in almost all Jaunsari households. The monogamous content of the daily soaps and movies on television and radio broadcasts have played an important role in changing the peoples’ mindsets, especially women. Young girls and even women watch these programmes during their leisure time. A young girl of 10 named Deepika says that she is captivated by the daily serials and spends most of her time watching them. Her favourite among the soaps is “*Yeh rishta kya kehlaata hai*”.
- **Infrastructural development and acculturation:** Infrastructural development like roads, medical and health facilities have contributed immensely to the changes occurring in polyandry. Infrastructural development has caused infiltration by non-polyandrous people into the region and has resulted in acculturation or complete homogenization of culture in some regions.

Discussion

Polyandrous and ‘polygynandrous’ patterns found throughout the spread of this thesis can be traced and compiled into a common concept of these practices that are found in the vast precipitous Himalayan mountains of Jaunsar Bawar. Polyandry in these places is usually restricted to adelphic polyandry where co-resident brothers share a common wife and children. Polygynandry is when these brothers acquire multiple wives for several reasons such as when the first wife is sterile, the wife demands a divorce or if the household requires more labour for agriculture. In order to verify these statements, the data required to test the hypotheses was difficult to gather mainly because the

research population was hesitant and unwilling at first to disclose necessary information as it violated their private space. Since most questions pertained to their sexual relations, they shied away from divulging the intricacies of their unusual tradition. This led to the unavailability of large relevant data. The unavailable data leaves much room for error, in that relationships that may be there cannot be found. However, in one respect, this indicates that the significant findings in this thesis must be very descriptive offering a far more in-depth explanation of polyandry than exists to this point.

There are a number of limitations of this study. Many facets of polyandry in the areas studied may have gone unrecorded may be because they were not reported in such a way that the case would turn up in a search of the literature. The methods and ways adopted in this thesis for looking at polyandry from a woman's perspective have in some cases deliberately eliminated certain perspectives and conceptual approaches to the study, for example, the sexual selection theory and the partible paternity theory. Perhaps the greatest limitation, though, was not the lack of information available and accessible, but the fact that the data that exists on most of these groups is all that will ever exist. It is mainly because most Jaunsaris are now abandoning their practice of polyandry and preferring monogamy causing this historical tradition to fade into extinction. Therefore, it makes further research on most of these groups difficult.

However, further research is possible. Since the current literature on polyandry neglects the role of women in managing polyandrous unions, it would add to the existing sea of information if studied polyandry from the feminist perspective. Another direction would be to examine the transitions that have crept in and led to the endangerment of this practice.

Conclusion

This thesis shows that polyandry covers a scope far beyond what scholars like Murdock, Berreman, Majumdar and Levine suggested it does. The main theories have centred on the conditions under which fraternal polyandry occurs and the role of women and the transitions that these polyandrous societies have undergone have gone unnoticed. The hypothesis of this research that the culture of the polyandrous Jaunsaris is undergoing transformation has proved positive.

After careful analysis of its patterns and characteristics in this thesis and after considering the various forms of polyandry, fraternal polyandry has been defined as an union through marriage in which a woman is married into a family of two or more co-resident brothers who commonly enjoy her sexuality and commonly bear the responsibility, legal or otherwise, of any children born into that union.

The descriptive analysis of the Jaunsari tribe in Matiyawa and Mohana show that this band resides in the Himalayan hills of northern India where they practice slash and burn agriculture and terrace farming. The villages are entirely self-sufficient and men and women both provide labour power needed for agriculture. They practice polyandry because of not one particular reason but because of the combination of several factors. They are being the descendants of the Pandavas who were also polyandrous feel obligated to follow in their footsteps. Also being fraternally polyandrous gives them the advantages of keeping the family wealth intact, commonly acquiring a wife with a certain amount of bride price which is helpful especially when the family is poor; protecting the family during the eldest brother's prolonged absence and keeping intra-familial harmony.

These findings also refute Levine's notion of male sexual jealousy and their inability to share a wife being responsible for the failure of a polyandrous union. The results clearly show that this is not the case and is in fact quite the contrary. Polyandrous brothers in Jaunsar hold no sexual jealousy or

inhibitions and harmoniously participate in sharing the wife's sexuality as they feel they are right in following in the footsteps of their forefathers.

In cases where marriageable women are often unavailable, for instance in the Matiyawa where there are far more men than women in the population, or when men cannot provide enough resources to care for a wife and children of their own, polyandry is one possible solution which allows them to make the best of a less than ideal situation and share a wife. In these instances, when a man cannot have his own wife, it would serve him better to share a wife than to have no wife at all. Likewise, it would be more beneficial to him and his reproductive fitness to increase his chances of fathering at least one child and investing in it than it would be to risk having no child at all. Under these conditions they are, in essence, making the best of a bad situation.

Therefore, polyandry seems to be one strategy employed by different groups of people, under different conditions to solve problems like an imbalance, or husbands being away for long periods; and it would be wrong to assume that there is only one primary causal factor of polyandry.

Polyandry along with its justified merits and evils creates a perplex situation and fails to provide a flawless and rich background for anyone who wishes to take a standing in the matter. It includes merits which are even more beneficial than monogamy or other forms of marriage unions. But if one looks at it from a feminist perspective, the ills associated with it make it difficult to consider its merits. The exploitation of women, the violation of the health factor bracketed with having multiple sex partners together help in determining the standpoint of this thesis. The thesis therefore ends at this juncture with the view that the transition from polyandry to monogamy among the Jaunsaris is a positive and a progressive change.

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