

# Changing Patterns of Polyandry in Kinnaur: Tradition vs Transition

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## Abstract

Polyandry, where a woman is married to multiple men simultaneously, is practiced in various regions of the Indian Himalayas, including Kinnaur. The Kinnaura society follows a form of polyandry known as adelphic polyandry, where brothers collectively marry a common wife and share responsibilities for her and their children. Over time, polyandry in Kinnaur has faced challenges and is declining, though some continue the practice for personal reasons. This study explores the diverse marriage systems in Kinnaur and investigates the factors influencing the persistence and decline of polyandry.

**Keywords:** Polyandry, Adelpic Polyandry, Joint Responsibility, Persistence, Decline.

## Introduction:

The term "polyandry" originates from the Greek words "polyandria" and "polyandros," denoting the state of a woman having multiple husbands. In contrast, its counterpart "polygyny," derived from "poly" and "gynia," signifies a man having multiple wives. Notably, neither term inherently implies marriage, while "polygamy," from "poly" and "gamia," broadly refers to the marriage of multiple individuals, encompassing both polyandry and polygyny (Singh, 1978).

Scholars hold varying interpretations of polyandry, yet its core definition remains consistent: the marriage of one woman to multiple men, constituting a form of marital union established through contract (McLannan, 1896). Spencer (1921) identifies polyandry as emerging from primitive human societies in an unregulated state, often categorized as a form of "group marriage" (Briffault, 1927). Kapadia (cited in Raha & Coomar, 1987) views polyandry as a marital arrangement where a woman may have more than one husband concurrently, including cases where brothers share a wife or have wives in common.

Polyandry is typically classified into "fraternal" and "non-fraternal" forms. Fraternal polyandry, the more common and cohesive type, involves husbands who are either biological brothers or close kin. In contrast, non-fraternal polyandry consists of unrelated husbands (Levine & Silk, 1997; Starkweather,

## Profile of Kinnaur

Kinnaur is situated as one of Himachal Pradesh's twelve districts, predominantly houses a tribal population. It is administratively segmented into three blocks: Kalpa, Nichar, and Pooh, with Reckong Peo serving as its administrative hub. Encompassing an area of 6401 square kilometers, Kinnaur recorded a population of 84,121 as per the 2011 Census. Its inhabitants, known as 'Kinnaura', are recognized under governmental classification as a Tribal District. This recognition upholds tribal

customs and regulations documented in the '*Wazib-ul-Arz*', superseding them only upon the Kinnaura's specific request for governmental, judicial, or police intervention. For example, the practice of bride capture is permissible under local norms, with police involvement contingent upon the bride's complaint. The Kinnaura community is composed mainly of two ethnic groups: the Rajputs (Upper Caste) and the Scheduled Castes (Low Caste), both enjoying equal rights under state law. Kinnaura society adheres to patrilineal and patrilocal norms, wherein inheritance is equally divided among sons, and daughters inherit property only in the absence of brothers or if specified by their father before his demise. Unmarried women may receive small plots of land for their lifetime needs. According to marriage customs, brides receive land and a house in their name at the time of marriage through the custom of 'Ponobitho', which remains theirs for life.

Polyandry, known locally as 'Mustrika Shadi', is a prevalent form of marriage in Kinnaur, a scheduled tribe district of Himachal Pradesh. Its persistence amidst rapid socio-economic changes driven by modernization underscores its unique institutionalized nature. This cultural practice, where two or more brothers share a common wife throughout their lives, raises intriguing questions about its sustainability amid the decline of communal values under capitalist development and the ascendancy of individualism. Polyandry in Kinnaur traces its origins to the epic Mahabharata period, where the narrative of the five Pandavas sharing one wife, Draupadi, finds mythological resonance. Many places and structures in Kinnaur bear names associated with the Pandavas, such as Moorang fort and Labrang fort, reflecting their historical presence in the region.

The marriage customs of Kinnaur distinguish it from other regions in India, encompassing practices of both monogamy and polyandry, with occasional instances of polygyny among the Kinnaura community. Formal and informal marriages are acknowledged within Kinnauri customs, where the proposal of marriage by the bride's family is considered inappropriate, unlike mainstream customs. Instead, it is customary for the groom's family to initiate discussions about marriage. Typically, a close relative of the groom's family contacts the bride's family to convey their intentions.

Marriage in Kinnaur is classified into three main types. The first, known as Janetang or janekang, involves a ceremony where the entire village and relatives are invited. The marriage is solemnized with the arrival of the village deity, Gram Devta, on the roof of the groom's house. Historically, during the peak of polyandry, Janetang ceremonies occurred once in a generation, although this practice has evolved over time.

The second type of marriage, Yotang Majomi rang, is chosen when either the economic conditions of the bride or the groom and bride are not favorable. In this scenario, the groom does not visit the bride's home to escort her to his house. Instead, three representatives from the groom's side visit the bride's home to bring her to the groom's house, where the marriage is conducted following other customary rituals.

These distinct marriage practices in Kinnaur offer a rich cultural tapestry that warrants exploration from a sociological perspective.

In Kinnaur, the third type of marriage is termed as Udanang zab-mo. This form of marriage occurs when a girl and boy decide to marry out of mutual consent or love, or in cases where the boy brings the girl home without her explicit agreement, akin to a marriage by capture. In such situations, the boy's father typically dispatches intermediaries, known as majomi, along with local wine (korang), to placate and facilitate acceptance between the two families or parties involved. This practice includes the girl's family

presenting Udanang, which consists of money, ornaments, and utensils, to acknowledge her rights, hence earning the designation Udanang zab-mo (Negi, 2018).

Marriages among the Kinnaura community encompass various forms: from traditional practices like marriage by capture (dab-dab or darosh), arranged marriages, to modern iterations such as love marriages (damchaltshis & benang hachis), and elopements without parental consent (Bagyashis) (Bajpai, 1981). While some scholars categorize these as distinct types of marriage, it's essential to note they represent local methods of bringing a bride into the family fold (Negi, 2018). These customs stand distinct and often unimaginable in mainland India.

In Kinnauri marriage customs, the formal wedding ceremony is not obligatory and may not necessarily coincide with the marriage itself. It's not uncommon for couples to begin living together as a new marital unit before or without a formal ceremony. In some cases, couples conduct a formal wedding even after starting a family, locally known as badi shadi.

In a formally arranged marriage among the Kinnaura community, the bride's family receives a pre-agreed sum from the groom's family for the purchase of ornaments and clothing. Typically, the eldest son, accompanied by members from his lineage and village, visits the bride's family to initiate the marriage proceedings. The ceremony commences with rituals, accompanied by singing, dancing, and feasting. Once all rituals are completed, the groom returns with the bride to his family's residence.

Upon reaching the groom's house, a unique marriage custom distinct from practices elsewhere unfolds. Initially, only the eldest brother performs the marriage ritual at the bride's house. However, upon returning to the groom's house, all brothers partake in a special ceremony known as 'Zanekang' or 'Zanchang'. Here, while the eldest brother marries the bride initially, all brothers subsequently become co-husbands through a ritual termed the 'turban tying ceremony' (Raha & Mahato, 1985: 252-253).

The practice of polyandry in Kinnaur has deep historical roots and continues as a social norm today. Unlike fraternal polyandry in other regions, the form practiced in Kinnaur exhibits unique characteristics. Historical evidence supports the prevalence of polyandry in Kinnaur, as noted by Gerard's observation in the mid-19th century (Lloyd, Gerard, 1846). In the Indian Himalayas, where polyandry often coexists with polygamy, scholars have identified several benefits, including reduced land fragmentation, diversification of economic activities within households, and slower population growth rates (Chandra, 1987; Majumdar, 1962; Parmar, 1975).

Scholars have argued that polyandry, often termed polygynandry, serves to optimize household labor according to dependent needs and available resources. Polyandry is simply defined as a marital arrangement where a woman has multiple husbands simultaneously. When these husbands are brothers, the practice is termed fraternal polyandry (Gough, 1959; Prince Peter, 1963).

The origins of polyandry in Kinnaur encompass various facets: mythological, demographic, ecological, economic, and sociological. Mythologically, the practice traces back to the Mahabharata, where it is believed the Pandavas, who were brothers, resided in Kinnaur during their exile. Princess Draupadi is said to have married all five Pandava brothers, influencing the Kinnauras who admired the Pandavas' deeds (Mazumdar, 1955). Kinnauras adopted the practice of fraternal polyandry, where brothers collectively share a wife (Raha & Coomar, 1988).

Scholars have offered diverse perspectives on the origins and continuance of polyandry. Some theories link it to imbalanced sex ratios, female infanticide, prevention of property inheritance among brothers, land division practices, high bride prices, social security considerations, and risk mitigation in poverty-stricken contexts. However, the reasons for and occurrences of polyandry vary widely across societies,

even within regions with similar geographical and climatic conditions. For instance, polyandry practices differ significantly between Himalayan regions like Tibet, Nepal, and Kinnaur, highlighting the complexity of these institutions (Goldstein).

Common viewpoints often connect polyandry with sex ratios. Parmar's work on "Polyandry in the Himalayas" correlates the practice with skewed sex ratios, whereas Kapadia (1955) argues against this correlation, asserting that sex disparities do not necessarily lead to polyandry. In Kinnaur, where the sex ratio is balanced, the argument linking polyandry to sex ratios does not hold, as evidenced by Census data from 2011, which indicates a steady sex ratio. Moreover, the presence of unmarried women in Kinnaur, who are considered an asset, further challenges assumptions about polyandry and sex ratios. It is notable that while some societies with low sex ratios do not practice polyandry, Kinnaur continues to maintain its unique customs despite demographic changes.

One of the primary factors contributing significantly to polyandry in Kinnaur is the combination of geo-ecological and economic conditions. Historically, the Kinnauras maintained trade links with Tibet and predominantly engaged in agro-pastoralism. Due to the region's challenging terrain and limited fertility of the land, agricultural productivity was modest. Families supplemented their income through pastoral activities such as wool and milk production, as well as through barter trade with Tibet. However, these pursuits often entailed risks to life, prompting families to adopt a cooperative strategy. This involved members engaging in pastoral and trade activities while others managed agricultural tasks at home. Such cooperative efforts were essential for achieving self-sufficiency.

Researchers like Chandra (1974), Mazumdar (1963), and Prince Peter (1963) have recognized the role of economic factors in sustaining polyandry. Chandra (1981) succinctly portrays the socio-economic realities of the region, emphasizing the harshness of life in the north-western Himalayas. The region's small and infertile landholdings necessitated intensive labor for moderate agricultural yields. Additionally, the introduction of horticulture required specialized skills and scientific knowledge to be successful.

The ecological and social conditions of Kinnaur further supported the practice of polyandry. The mountainous terrain, severe weather conditions, and limited arable land made sole reliance on agriculture impractical. Consequently, a system evolved where pooling resources and labor among family members became crucial for economic survival. This cooperative approach not only prevented land fragmentation but also expanded the labor force available for agricultural and other economic activities, thereby improving overall livelihoods.

Historically, economic incentives also played a role in cementing polyandrous practices. The Punjab State Gazetteer (1910) notes that polyandry was supported by state policies that discouraged land fragmentation through inheritance laws favoring the eldest son. This ensured continuity in land ownership and discouraged challenges from other brothers within the family structure.

Moreover, Kinnaur's status as an agro-pastoral community with ties to Tibet meant that family members often faced risks associated with trade and seasonal migration. This necessitated a practice like polyandry to maintain family unity and stability during prolonged absences of husbands from home.

These conditions align with Westermarck's (1926) synchronic explanations for polyandry, which highlight factors such as skewed sex ratios, resource constraints, geographical limitations, and extended periods of husband absence as predictors. In Kinnaur, where land scarcity and patrilineal inheritance norms prevail, fraternal polyandry emerged as a practical solution to safeguard ancestral property,

particularly land and livestock, while preventing its fragmentation among male heirs (Tiwari, 2001; Crook & Crook, 1988; Tiwari, 2008).

The diversity of marriage practices across regions, religions, and cultures highlights the universal significance of marriage as a social institution. In the small hilly tribal district of Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, however, attention is drawn due to its historical practice of polyandry, which has intrigued sociologists, thinkers, and researchers.

While monogamy is currently the predominant form of marriage among the Kinnauras, polyandry was widely prevalent in the past among a significant portion of the population. Additionally, instances of polygyny and polygynandry have also been documented, with polygynandry appearing to evolve from the traditional polyandrous arrangements.

Over time, the dynamics of marriage practices within families have evolved according to their changing needs and circumstances. The complex marital history of Kinnaur is evident through narratives collected during interactions with respondents. One respondent shared a personal account illustrating the evolution of marriage practices in her life:

### Case Study

"Pema" (name changed), a resident of a village in Kinnaur, found herself in a unique marital arrangement typical of the region's traditions. Pema was married to three brothers from the same family: Tashi, Sonam, and Dorje. This fraternal polyandrous union was not uncommon in their community, where economic considerations and traditional beliefs intertwined.

Initially, Pema's marriage to the three brothers was seen as a practical solution to the family's agricultural needs. The brothers jointly managed their small plot of land, which was not fertile enough to support multiple households separately. By sharing a wife, they ensured that their land holdings remained intact and productive.

Over time, however, challenges arose within the polyandrous household. Tashi, the eldest brother, often struggled with asserting his authority over household decisions, while Sonam and Dorje sought more autonomy in managing their joint resources. Pema, on her part, found herself balancing the affections and expectations of each husband, navigating the complexities of shared domestic life.

Despite these challenges, the polyandrous arrangement endured for several years, reflecting both the resilience of traditional customs and the practical realities of life in Kinnaur. As economic opportunities expanded and social norms evolved, however, such polyandrous unions became less common, with younger generations opting for more conventional marital arrangements.

This case highlights the intricate dynamics of polyandry in Kinnaur, where cultural traditions and economic imperatives have historically shaped marital practices.

### Persistence and Decline of Polyandry in Kinnaur

As previously discussed, polyandry in Kinnaur is facing a decline, with monogamy becoming the dominant marital practice in recent times. Polyandry, although an ancient social norm, is still followed by many in the region. Over time, significant changes have occurred in the social norms surrounding polyandry. There are instances where respondents have accepted the practice of polyandry due to societal and familial pressures.

It is evident that some individuals find themselves in polyandrous relationships against their own preferences or will, influenced by broader social expectations and familial obligations. This involuntary



participation could contribute to the weakening of polyandry as a sustainable social institution. Despite its decline, several factors continue to sustain polyandry in Kinnaur. These factors play a crucial role in the persistence of this practice amidst changing societal norms. Research indicates that economic considerations, such as land management and resource allocation, historically favored polyandrous arrangements. Additionally, cultural traditions and the preservation of familial inheritance have also contributed to the continuation of polyandrous marriages in certain communities. While polyandry faces challenges in the contemporary socio-economic landscape of Kinnaur, its persistence can be attributed to a complex interplay of historical practices, economic necessities, and cultural values.

### Conclusion

Polyandry in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, presents a fascinating case study of a unique marital practice that has persisted through centuries but is now facing significant challenges. This ancient tradition, where one woman marries multiple brothers, reflects a complex interplay of historical, economic, cultural, and social factors.

Throughout history, polyandry in Kinnaur served practical purposes rooted in economic necessity. The region's challenging geographical and ecological conditions, characterized by rugged terrain and limited arable land, necessitated cooperative agricultural and pastoral practices. Polyandry enabled the consolidation of resources within a household, preventing the fragmentation of land and ensuring the sustainable management of scarce resources like water and grazing land. Economic benefits, such as shared labor and pooled resources, were crucial for the survival and prosperity of families in this harsh environment.

Culturally, polyandry in Kinnaur has deep roots, often traced back to mythological narratives such as the Mahabharata, where Draupadi's marriage to the five Pandava brothers symbolizes a form of fraternal polyandry. This cultural association with ancient epics provided legitimacy and continuity to the practice over generations.

However, the socio-economic changes of recent decades have posed significant challenges to polyandrous marriages in Kinnaur. Modernization, improved infrastructure, and educational opportunities have altered traditional livelihoods and economic dependencies. Shifts towards monogamy are increasingly observed, reflecting broader changes in societal norms and individual aspirations.

Moreover, the demographic trends, including improved healthcare and declining mortality rates, have altered family dynamics. The preference for smaller families and individualistic values has reduced the practical necessity of polyandry as a means of economic survival or resource management.

Social pressures and individual preferences also play a crucial role in the decline of polyandry. Younger generations may not always embrace traditional practices, preferring marital arrangements that align with personal autonomy and modern values of equality and choice.

In conclusion, while polyandry in Kinnaur continues to hold cultural and historical significance, its prevalence is gradually diminishing. The persistence of polyandry in the face of modernization underscores its resilience and adaptability over time. As Kinnaur navigates the complexities of socio-economic transformation, understanding the factors influencing the decline of polyandry provides valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of marriage and family structures in contemporary Himalayan societies.

Through continued research and dialogue, scholars and policymakers can further explore the legacy and

contemporary relevance of polyandry in Kinnaur, contributing to broader discussions on cultural diversity, gender dynamics, and the adaptive capacity of traditional practices in a rapidly changing world.

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