

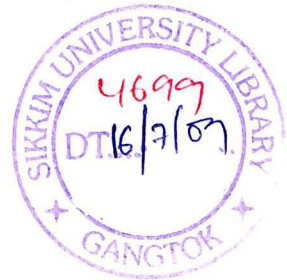
The book cover features a close-up portrait of a woman's face on the left side, looking slightly to the right. She has a serene expression and is wearing a red garment with a blue and white patterned scarf. In the background, a majestic Himalayan mountain range is visible under a clear blue sky, with a prominent snow-capped peak. The overall scene is set in a lush, green valley.

D D Sharma

Peculiar
Customs and Rites
of the
Himalayan
People

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PECULIAR CUSTOMS AND RITES OF THE HIMALAYAN PEOPLE



D. D. SHARMA



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Acknowledgement

Knowledge of any subject or discipline is neither a mystic perception like intuition nor a spiritual realization, but something apparently acquired through the senses of perception, may be through a dialogue, oral or symbolic, or through a direct observation. It flows from past to present and as such widens and enriches its sphere for every coming generation which in its turn brings about its own additions, improvements and rectifications in every sphere of it. In fact, the greater part of our present day knowledge about various objects and events of the universe is a legacy of the past.

Moreover, an individual, howsoever, genius or intelligent he/she may be has his/her limitations, both mental as well as physical, i.e. he can neither be omniscient nor can have an access to every nook and corner of this vast planet. So one has to depend for the greater part of one's knowledge on the information already made available by others on a particular aspect of it. As such the knowledge about certain socio-cultural aspects of the Himalayan Communities too could not be an exception to this normal process of acquiring knowledge.

I have no hesitation in admitting that quite a good quantity of information presented in this volume owes its source to earlier writers and researchers, to whom I sincerely feel a sense of indebtedness. I, however, find myself in an embarrassing position to make a mention of all of them. All they have been duly listed in the bibliography appended to this volume. Still there are some names the mention of which is a must for me. Above all there comes the name of my dear friend late Shri Janaklal Sharma, Chairman of the Institute of the High-Mountain Archaeology in Nepal. It was his monumental work, *'Hamro Samaj : Ek Addhyayan* (in Nepali) which inspired me to undertake the present project and forms the base for the greater part of information provided in this volume about the Tribal Communities of Nepal. He not only encouraged me to go ahead with the project, but also was generous enough to allow me to

utilize his material liberally and also provided me material on this subject pertaining to Nepal. I am highly grateful to him for his generous consent to use his material for my work and encouragement for its early completion.

Another work that needs a special mention in respect of Nepal is "*Marriage Customs of Nepal*" by M/s Majupurias. It was a sort of supplement to the monumental work of Mr. Sharma so far as the marriage customs of Nepal were concerned. I am equally grateful to the authors of the book in question.

I shall be failing in my duty if I do not express my thanks to my son, Prof. (Dr.) Mukulendu Sharma and his daughter Miss Himangi Sharma who took pains to prepare a flawless floppy of this manuscript for the press.

Last, but not the least, I would sincerely like to record my thankfulness to the publisher of this volume, M/s Mittal Publications for undertaking and bringing it out timely.

D D SHARMA

Introduction

Existence of strikingly peculiar socio-cultural features is but natural in a multi-racial and multicultural country like Indian sub-continent. But there have been not many attempts to present their panoramic view at a glance. The aim of the present volume is an effort in this very direction, if not of all, at least of a few of them, pervading the life cycle of the people of a geo-physical part of it, viz. the tribal communities of the Himalayan region. But before presenting a comprehensive account of certain customs, rites and rituals, it would be profitable to have some idea of the nature, extent and operational mechanism of these aspects of socio-cultural importance to appreciate them in a proper prospective.

At the very outset of it, it may be said that social customs of any human group, may be primitive or advanced one, are long established usages which dominate all round socio-cultural activities of the society concerned and in their operation are much more comprehensive than any other law. According to Wundt, "Custom is concerned with the constant need of the society, and is subject to change only with the change in conditions of life or theories of living, and, as this change is reflected in the form of custom, custom is as truly a picture of moral consciousness of the community, as a man's habits are expression of his individual character. Habits can constantly be formed anew, because new individuals, whose habits they are, are constantly coming into existence, but a custom, the national habit endures while the nation endures." (Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Volume-IV, 4th impression, 1959).

To trace the history of the inception of every custom is almost a difficult task, in view of its antiquity. There are many customs and rituals in every community the world over the origin of which is irretrievably lost in oblivion and only their shadowy, nebulous legendary traces have come down to us.

Moreover, some of the rites and rituals which have originated

from various kinds of beliefs, superstitions or sentiments, are ageless and immutable, regardless of time and state of cultural and social advancement of the community which practises them. In fact, these are the accumulated sets of modalities of human groups which were framed and followed by them at different points of their socio-cultural advancement and change in living conditions. For, as was natural, that with the change in the living conditions and in the outlook of the members of the social group concerned, there have been coming up formal and conceptual changes, may be complete or partial. As a result of this there have come into practice multiple sets of rites and rituals manifested through different forms and in different manners.

Interestingly, there are certain sets of rites and rituals in every society which inspite of their being irrelevant to changed conditions linger on in their original forms. It is on account of these historical, social and psychological factors that multiple sets of socio-cultural customs, rites and rituals are attested in various racial and social groups all over the world. Moreover, the ritualistic sanctity accorded to them by the tradition has kept them alive for all these years uninterruptedly.

So far as the tribal communities of the Himalayas, to which this volume has been devoted, are concerned, it may be pointed out that, though these people are very fond of fairs and festivals, yet have very little concern about the rites and rituals pertaining to various events of the life cycle of an individual. The only significant event in their life cycle, in which observance of rites and rituals of an elaborate scale, is a must, is the event of death. With regard to marriage too it has been observed that there are only a few communities in which ritualistic performances form an essential part of it, otherwise in most of them it is formalized just with a feast or so.

Similarly, in most of the communities birth of a child or naming of it is no event of celebration or ritualistic purification, etc. As such the new born is named at will after the traditionally recognized period of pollution is over, and is also fed solid food, unceremoniously, when he/she is 5-6 months old or is capable of taking solid food.

With regard to the customs and rituals of marriage, so religiously observed in the Aryan societies, it has been observed that among most of the tribal communities of the Himalayas, a marital bond is neither sacrosanct nor irrevocable, there literally, it is a marriage of conveniences and as such is dissoluble at will.

Although under the influence of other neighbouring Communities many of them have, besides the traditional one, adopted the form of so called arranged marriage as well and have also adopted some half baked rituals of it, yet the traditionally adopted modes of getting a mate, viz. marriage by capture/abduction/elopement/choice or by theft/seduction, etc., are still favoured in many of them.

Moreover, in all forms of marriage, except the arranged one, cash payment of compensation to the parents of the girl, or to her former husband, in case of seduction, is a must to have the social sanction and the legitimatization of the marriage alliance. In many communities payment of bride price, may be in cash, in kind or in the form of service too is a common practice. In arranged marriages too, usually, the boy's parents have to supply the articles of food and drink to the parents of the girl for the marriage feasts from both sides.

In all sorts of marriages offering of presents or paying of obeisance in the form of money, liquor and meat, etc. is obligatory in all ceremonies, may be engagement, seeking consent from the parents of the girl, in case of abduction or elopement, or observance of other customary ceremonies till the marriage formalities are completed or even thereafter too. No marriage alliance is legitimised without paying an obeisance to the parents of the girl, may be even after many years.

No ritualistic formalities, except a few local customs, are observed in any form of marriage. The only exception to this generalisation, are the Newars of Nepal.

However, the tribal communities are very particular about their death rites based on their various kinds of superstitious beliefs and fears. In some communities they are quite complicated and elaborate too. In the following pages an attempt has been made to present a few glimpses of these socio-cultural phenomena of some of the tribal folks from the Himalayas. Besides, a few more glimpses pertaining to other aspects of their socio-cultural life too, have been given under different heads with a hope that these will not only help in having a wider view of the socio-cultural panorama of the people from the Himalayas, but also create an interest among the readers to know more and more of these aspects of these and other inhabitants of the great Himalayan regions of this sub-continent.

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Marriage Systems among Himalayan Tribes

1.1 Institution of Marriage

In every human group, tribal or non tribal, marriage and sex relation is a subject which occupies an important place in its social set up. There it is regulated by certain written or un-written codes which vary from one social group to another, but at the same time, have a strong bearing on the socio-cultural life of the society concerned as a whole.

Marriage, though, is not a predetermined unavoidable event, as some may believe, yet it is certainly an important event in the life cycle of a human being. Out of the three important events, viz. birth, marriage and death, of the human cycle, having a mate, i.e. marriage, is an event which every human being with a sound mind and health would invariably like to welcome, may be driven by animal instinct or by religious compulsion. As such while presenting some most interesting aspects of the socio-cultural life of the people of Himalayan regions we would like to have the glimpses of the customs, rites and rituals relating to nuptial ceremonies of these people which may be presented as under:

1.2 Concept of Marriage among Tribals

In the absence of evolution of ethical considerations, and religious or spiritual ideals of marriage, the purpose of the so called marriage, among the tribals was simply to have a mate to pacify their animal instinct and to procreate a few helping hands in their daily routines. It is on account of this that there are no religious ritualistic formalities associated with it. Normally, the mode of getting a mate

was the use of physical force. A willing or unwilling female mate was forcibly carried away by a male counterpart and she was forced or persuaded to accept him as her husband, and consent of parents or of the former husband, if already married, was obtained later on by paying compensation in cash or in kind and social sanction for it was obtained by offering a feast to their tribal kinsmen.

Moreover, in the absence of any religious or ritualistic sanctity attached to it and the absence of evolution of the ethical concept of chastity, there was laxity enough in their conjugal relations. Consequently, there was a lenient view towards the extra marital relations and the marital bond too, was loosely knit.

It could be broken at will and union with another male or female partner could be established without any social or legal problem arising out of it. As such the sense of unbreakable bond between the husband and wife is totally missing there. Infact, it is basically, a partnership between two equals. Traditionally or ritualistically, too there is nothing that may suggest that a tribal wife should regard her husband as her lord or a venerable godling.

Besides, in most of the tribal communities the status of a girl or a woman was no more than that of an object of physical enjoyment or of a commodity. As such, she was regarded as her husband's personal property which could be inherited, disposed off or shared or even could be lended to another person, temporarily or permanently, without any inhibition whatsoever.

1.3 Forms of Marriage

From the point of association of the number of sexual mates, i.e. male and female mates participating as husbands and wives, marriage forms prevalent among the communities under consideration may be classified as (i) *Monogamy*, i.e. a single husband having a single wife, (ii) *Bigamy*, i.e. a single husband having two wives, (iii) *Polygamy*, i.e. male or female having multiple wives or husbands. In this category the former type of association is termed as *polygyny*, i.e. a single husband having many wives simultaneously, and the latter type of association as *polyandry*, i.e. multiple husbands sharing a common wife. Besides the above, there is also a form of polygamy, termed as polygynandry which combines the forms of both, the polygyny and polyandry, i.e. multiple husbands sharing multiple wives or vice versa. These may be explained in the following pages, but the form of marriage that may be of special interest to our readers

and needs somewhat elaboration is polyandry and its variations. Other forms which are well known to all may be referred briefly.

1.3.1 Polygyny

It is a form of polygamy in which a single husband can have more than two women as legitimate wives simultaneously. In India it has a long sustained history, right from the earliest period of it. Vedic literature provides a number of instances of its existence in that age. The history of middle ages is replete with innumerable instances of it. As in the case of polyandry, this form of marriage too has certain variations.

1.3.2 Sororal Polygyny

Among many primitives, customarily the husband of the eldest daughter has an expressed privilege and right to have all sisters as his wives as soon as they reach marriageable age. Acquiring of marital rights by a husband over his wife's sisters is said to be a wide spread principle in primitive societies. Brifault states that in Queen land, Australia, among the natives of the Penne Feather and Tully rivers, a man is understood to have the same sexual rights over his wife's sisters as over his wife, whether they happen to be married or not.

In South East Australia when a person secures a wife from another tribe through capture or elopement, her parents, when the resentment and anger subsides and the matter is amicably settled, turn over her sisters also to their son-in-law. According to Fielding, W.J. (1949; 174-75) "These practices seem to indicate that sororate is a remnant of group marriage or general form of clan promiscuity, giving the man sexual claim upon all the women of the group with which his own group has entered into a marriage agreement. Thus sororate is gradually breaking away from gross promiscuity, an important step in the evolution of marriage, and the marital alliance is generally restricted to the several sisters of a family." Among the Himalayan communities it is partially attested among the Dokpas of Ladakh only.

1.3.3 Polyandry

Under this form of marriage, as opposed to polygyny a woman can have more than one husband or we may say that a common wife can be shared by more than one or two husbands.

Polyandry was quite common among the Nairs of Kerala and Tulus of South Canara. Iravans of Malabar and the Coorgs, Todas

and Kotas of Nilgiri as well. Its existence outside the territories of Indian subcontinent has also been reported from Ceylon. Among the Himalayan folks it is the most widely practised form of marriage, which in a more or less degree is attested in all the regions of it, may be in its pure form, i.e. a simple common wife shared by two or more husbands or multiple common wives shared by multiple common husbands, viz. polygynous polyandry.

1.3.4 Polygynandry

There is a different kind of polyandry which combines the elements of both, polygyny and polyandry. In it sexual partnership is established among many male and female partners together, i.e. all men and women of this union can freely have an access to any man or woman to make him/her, his/her sexual partner. It has been variously termed as 'group marriage', 'promiscuity', or 'sexual communism' as well by some scholars.

Besides among some of the Himalayan tribes noted above, this type of polyandrous union is said to exist among the Todas of South India. According to their custom when a man marries a girl she on this very act automatically becomes the wife of all the brothers of a common parentage and, moreover, inversely all the brothers customarily also become the husbands of all the sisters of the wife.

Polygynandry is also a time honoured marriage custom among the Khasas of Jaunsar-Bawar. Accordingly, under this system all the brothers of a common parentage, instead of having separate wives, commonly share all the wives married to the polyandrous family, though they may have been brought later on for younger brothers.

1.4 Forms of Himalayan Polyandry

But as in other forms of marriage, in this type of union too there are some notable variations with reference to male participants of it. There are two patterns of it, viz. (1) fraternal and (2) non-fraternal, which can further be classified on the basis of sharing the common wife, (1) by all brothers of a common parentage, (2) by two real brothers, (3) by two related brothers, (4) by two unrelated persons. All these forms of polyandry as noted for various tribes and communities of India and Nepal may briefly be explained as under:

1.4.1 Fraternal Polyandry

Under this system of polyandrous union it is the eldest or older brother to whom the bride is married and other brother or

brothers of a common parentage automatically acquire the right of husbandhood or of a sexual partner, as the custom may permit, through a ceremony performed at the time of marriage which in different communities and regions is symbolised differently, i.e. in some all the brothers or co-husbands are made to sit in a row on the right side of the bride and are made to sip or drink (milk or liquor) from the same cup from which the bride too has to sip, or a piece of cloth is spread over the heads of all the partners of this union alongwith the bride, or all the male partners are tied with a single piece of turban symbolising their close unity in this matter.

Even in case of a second marriage, apart from the first one, it is the elder or the eldest brother to whom the wife is given. Consequently, in these communities the eldest brother is socially acknowledged as the father of all the children born to this union and all others are uncles, but there are some communities in which the fatherhood is conferred on all the male partners of the union corresponding to the orders of children born to this union. There are still some communities in which though the social fatherhood is conferred on the eldest husband, yet all others too, are termed as fathers indiscriminately by all the children born to this union as is attested among the Todas of Nilgiri. Among the Himalayan tribes this form of marriage is primarily attested among the Khasas of Jaunsar-Bawar, Kinauras & Lahulas of Himachal Pradesh and Ladakhis of Jammu & Kashmir. Among Ladakhis, though primarily fraternal type of polyandry is practised in which all brothers born to common parents become the husbands of the wife, yet the right of real husband is vested with the eldest brother who brings the bride from her parental home. Moreover, for some time, after the marriage, he only holds the right of husband, but later on all brothers one by one get their right. After the completion of this cycle it is for the wife to shower her favours on any one of them.

1.4.2 Non-Fraternal Polyandry

In this type of polyandrous union the participating male members are fraternally unrelated between/among themselves. They, as in the case of Nairs, could be persons from different groups as well. This form of marriage though has become quite obsolete now, yet the most notable tribes practicing it in the past are said to be the Nairs of Malabar, Travancore and Cochin in South India.

According to this custom as prevalent among Nayars, every

girl before she attains puberty had to go through a marriage ceremony. This was duly consummated and the provisional husband received the customary fee and departed thereon, retaining no conjugal right over the girl, who remained with her parental family. Now, once duly married she could take for husband whomsoever she liked, except the provisional husband, married to her ceremoniously. The number of such husbands could be from four to twelve. These husbands had a conjugal right for a short period only, usually for a few days only, then they were free to participate in other conjugal endeavours of this polyandrous society. However, these one time husbands had to own certain marital responsibilities and duties that accompany the rights and privileges of a husband. As such, they were bound to provide maintenance to her in the form of clothes, food grain and other necessities of life as assigned to them separately.

Among Himalayan tribes existence of non-fraternal type of polyandry has been noted in the past in the Dolpo community in which, besides the real brothers, a wife could be shared by two friends as well. This form of sharing a wife by two friends with the consent of the wife was also practised among the polyandrous Tibetans and Ladakhis in Western Himalayas. There this sort of sharing of a wife could be for a limited period or permanent one. Besides, in some cases a wife could be lended to a friend for a limited period as well, though now all these forms of marriage have become a thing of the past.

1.5 Himalayan Polyandry Vs. Sexual Communism

Sexual promiscuity has been designated as group marriage by some writers, but many anthropologists not agreeing with the term of marriage associated with this, prefer to substitute it with the term "sexual communism" as a more appropriate designation.

It may, however, be pointed out that this type of marital arrangement is not by any means unrestricted sexual license, but is governed by definite regulations and limitations. It varies from community to community with their own local mores. All of them have well defined and well formulated codes, within the restriction of which the members of the organisation are expected to conduct themselves. It is the usual custom for each member of the group to have his own wife and a wife to have her own husband, but a right exists under certain conditions and subject to certain restrictions for exchange of women for co-habitation.

1.6 Sources of Himalayan Polyandry

All the Himalayan regions adjacent to Tibetan border have, from time immemorial, imbibed the cultural influences of the people living across the Indian and Nepal borders and also have been receiving a flux of the people of the Mongolian race from time to time to this side of the border. Therefore, it may be profitable to have some glimpses of the socio-cultural customs of Tibet to appreciate the socio-cultural aspects of the Himalayan populace in this background.

So far as the marriage is concerned it may be confidently said that most probably Tibet is the land which provides the earliest record of the marriage system, known as polyandry. In it, it has been a socially recognised system from time immemorial and its perfect legitimacy is also fully recognised by the law of the land. Basically, though it was a purely fraternal polyandry in which two real brothers used to have a common wife, but later on the practice of sharing a common wife by two or more related or unrelated persons too came into vogue. Although origin and continuance of this form of marriage is attributed to economic reasons, particularly to the will of the people to avoid division of meagre land holdings, yet other factors too, may have contributed to it. It may be said that all these factors, together or singly, have kept the system sustained under similar conditions in the most of the cis-Himalayan and trans-Himalayan regions of India, Nepal and Bhutan.

Interestingly, in the context of Tibetans, Youngusband, Francis (1984: 334) says "besides formal marriage with one or two brothers, real or related, a woman with the consent of her husband/husbands can marry another person, in addition to him/them. Moreover, in case of the death of the mother of the family either the father or the son/sons take a new spouse, who becomes, at the same time, the wife of the other male members of the family". From this statement of Youngusband it also appears that the Tibetan society, in the past, allowed a person and his son/sons from another wife to share a wife.

Moreover, from their residential point of view all the forms of marriage, practised by the Himalayan and the sub-Himalayan tribes under consideration fall under the category of patrilocal pattern, in which the wife has to go to live with her husband at his place. Consequently, in these tribes, except in a few in the North East

there is no community which may be practicing the matrilineal system, under which the husband has to go to live with the parents of the wife. Out of all the forms of marriage that need an elaboration there is polyandry, the only time honoured form of marriage of many tribal communities of the Himalayan countries of the Indian sub-continent. Elaboration of other forms of marriage may be confined to their peculiar customs, rites and rituals only.

1.7 Polyandry as Practiced among Himalayan Tribes

Some of the prominent communities practising this form of marriage may be noted as under :

1.7.1 Sherpas

In the Sherpa community of Nepal polyandry is a widely practised form of marriage in which two real or related brothers share a common wife. In case of more than two brothers in the fraternal web., another set of brothers brings a common wife for them. Moreover, if the partners of the common wife are the first and the third brother then the second brother enters monastery as a novice. In both the cases the offsprings belong to the elder brother only. But in the border areas of the northern most region of Sherpa inhabitates, normally, all brothers share a single wife and the eldest brother is the official father of all the children born to this union. Besides, two brothers can have two wives as well, but the marriage formalities are observed with regard to the elder brother only. Though both the brothers can share both the wives. The reason behind marrying the younger brother's wife with the elder brother is said to be that according to Sherpa social codes co-habitation with elder brother's wife is a socially acknowledged fact, whereas co-habitation with younger brother's wife is an incest or taboo. As such the second wife brought by the younger brother too is, customarily, wedded to the elder brother to avoid the problem of incest.

This form of marriage was also quite common among the Khasas of Jaunsar-Bawar. Accordingly, all men of each generation who are brothers marry together with one or, as is usually the case, more than one wife who are commonly shared by all, instead of having separate wives.

1.7.2 Dokpas

Marriage among the Dokpas (Brogpas) the Buddhist Dards of Ladakh is not a sacrosanct binding between a male and female. There it is rather a socially sanctioned contract between males

and a female or between females and a male, i.e. in this community both types of polyandrous unions, viz. Monogamy, Polyandry and polygynous polyandry is practised. Consequently, in the former type of marriage alliance is sought for the eldest son of the household and the younger ones, by virtue of the prevalent social custom, become co-sharer in it, though the status of fatherhood rests with the eldest husband only. Besides, two sisters can also be married to two brothers, but there too, both of them have equal right of access to both the wives. In the latter type of marital relation two sisters can together be married to a boy who is the only son of his parents. This is the most cherished form of marriage among the people of this community. For, according to them this type of alliances not only help in creating a cordial atmosphere in the family, but also contribute greatly to the prosperity of the household.

1.7.3 Kinauras

Though polyandry is now rapidly giving way to increasing trend of monogamy, yet till recent the practice of several brothers sharing a common wife was a general rule, rather than an exception in the tribal regions of H.P., viz. Lahul-Spiti and Kinnaur. There this system has stood the test of time and contributed to keep the families and their holdings together.

The abduction and elopement being the only traditionally and socially recognised forms of marriage, a kidnapped wife is directly brought to the house of the boy where she is ceremoniously wedded to all brothers of the family. For this, besides some formal rituals, a special ceremony, known as *paglikshimu* (to put on turban) is performed in Kinnaur in which brother participants of this union are made to sit in a row on a rug and a cloth piece termed as 'turban' is tied to the heads of all of them, symbolising their unity in this matrimonial bond. However, in some communities, as in Lahulas, all the brothers, sharing the alliance are made to sip wine from a common cup and at the end it is shared by the bride as well, as a token of accepting them all as her co-husbands.

1.7.4 Buddhist Lahulas

Polyandry among Buddhist Lahulas too is an honourable sacrosanct and traditionally approved custom of marriage from time immemorial. It was widely practised in the past, but now is on its speedy decline. The practice of polyandry prevalent

in this community is of the adelphic fraternal type, in which only the eldest brother weds a woman ceremoniously and she becomes a de-facto joint wife of all the brothers having a common parentage. This principle has been formulated as 'monomartial principle' by Goldstein (Referred by Moodey, 1978:3). Under this system, in principle, only one marriage is contracted in a given generation, and all the offsprings of this marriage have a full jural right in the corporation.

It needs no mention that this form of polyandry practised by the Buddhist Lahulas of Gahr and Tod valleys of Himachal Pradesh significantly differs from the form of polygynandry practised by the Khasas of Jaunsar-Bawar, in which two or more brothers marry one or two women as common wives and may subsequently add more wives when they can afford to this (see Majumdar, D.N. 1962:75). At the same time it also differs from the form of polyandry practised by Ladakhis, in which the conjugal right was to be given to only two younger brothers next to the elder brother.

Moreover, under the polyandrous system practised by the Lahulas no younger brother was allowed to have separate wife or to bring another woman in the house even if there was a vast difference of age in between the common wife and the youngest husband of the union. In this context Gill, M.S. (1972:143) has quoted a very unusual instance, in which he states that the youngest co-husband of a woman was so young that she suckled him in his infancy and when he himself grew up he took her as his wife and fathered children by her.

Other communities from the Himalayan countries, particularly from Nepal, among which polyandry is a time honoured custom are :Tamangs, Rais and Limbus. Till recent it was a socially sanctioned or even traditionally preferred form of marriage among some of these, but as in many other communities in these communities too it is fading out gradually.

1.8 Socio-cultural Aspect of Polyandry

1.8.1 Family Organisation in a Polyandrous Society

Polyandrous societies, allowing several brothers sharing a common wife, generally, do not have any problem if there is not a very wide age difference between the eldest and the youngest brother. But in many cases the common wife originally married to the eldest brother is older enough in age from her youngest husband, who some times even equal in age to her own children from

elder husbands. In such a case the younger husband is allowed to bring a separate wife for himself. Besides, a brother could bring a separate wife through love marriage as well. However, in principle, other brothers too have their conjugal right on them. But in case the new wife refuses to be shared by all other brothers the brother could be compelled to live separately with his share of property, though he still has his right on the original common wife. In such a case she may, however, refuse to have any sexual relation with them.

It may also be interesting to note that in former days when this system was universal in these regions a woman, with many husbands to serve her, was proud of her position. Moreover, characteristically, the women participants of a polyandrous union are as chaste, loyal and faithful to their husbands, as a chaste woman in the monogamous system, though in respect of dissolution of marital bonds she is more free than that of a woman in monogamous system.

In principle all the wives and the children are common to all brothers, but the tradition prescribes that it is only the eldest brother who marries all the wives and it is he who is regarded as the social father of all children born to this union. Even in the case when the younger brother is very much younger who deserves to have a young wife suitable to his age, it is the eldest brother who marries the girl in question. Moreover, he, as usual, may have his authority over this young bride as well, though he may in practice, concede this prerogative to his younger brother.

Besides, in certain communities, as in the Todas of south India, the first offspring of these marriages is attributed to the eldest brother, the second to the next one, and so on.

Similarly, the question of determining the fatherhood of the children born to a polyandrous union does not pose any problem to the society. Traditionally, the eldest brother is the representative of the family as well as the controller of all brothers in the matters of marriage and conjugal life. It is he who marries the wife or wives and again it is through him that his brothers have access to the common wife/wives. Moreover, in principle, as well as in practice, all brothers form a single group as "fraternal husbands" in the name of the eldest brother. For, in some communities the right of fatherhood rests with the eldest husband of the union and all others are uncles to them, and in others it goes turn by turn to every one, still in some all brothers are recognised as fathers of all the children,

the eldest being called as 'elder father' (*teg boba*) and the youngest as '*gato boba*' (younger father) etc. as in Kinnauri. If the joint family is broken up for any reason then it is the privilege of the wife to name the father of a particular child.

Similarly, the question of inheritance too does not pose any problem to them. There, according to customary laws of the society, in the event of the death of the eldest brother his share is inherited by his surviving brothers. In case of the death of all the brothers the property is inherited in equal shares by all sons begotten to them. But so long as any one of the brothers is living the dead brother/brothers are recorded as issueless in the revenue records. Consequently, it is inherited by the surviving brother/brothers and does not go to any child/children.

1.8.2 Role of a Polyandrous Wife

Although it may appear difficult enough for a common wife to manage smooth conjugal relation with all the husbands of a polyandrous union, yet this intricate problem of maintaining a balance with regard to the sexual interest of all the partners of this union and avoidance of any clash among them is so tactfully handled by the female partner of this union that there never arises any situation of clash among them. For this she had to conduct herself in such an impartial way that no husband may feel neglected or favoured even if she, her heart to heart, may have a soft corner or fondness for one of them which she never manifested openly. Moreover, the division of work too, is planned by her in such a way that there is hardly any occasion for their clash with regard to their conjugal activities.

In this context it may be interesting to note that the Sherpas of Nepal have evolved their own device to avoid accidental embarrassment for a husband when the other one is having his private engagement with the common wife. There each husband has his own pattern of his long elaborately decorated garter. As such, when a particular husband is to be with this wife, he hangs his garter out side the room which is an indicator of his engagement with her.

1.8.3 Inheritance of a Common Wife in Polyandrous Communities

A notable point of polyandrous family organisation is that the death of the eldest husband does not bring about any problem of the widowhood of the common wife or her inheritance. Customarily, in such an event the right of the married man over

the wife does not terminate with his death. It is passed on to the next partner of this union. Among the Sherpas of Nepal it is passed on to his uncle's son, if there is no living partner, or real brother. Thus the widow continues as a wife in the house of her late husband's junior kinsman without any formal ceremony.

1.9 Selection of a Mate

As compared with the Aryan codes of marriage the codes for the selection of a mate are less complicated among the Himalayan tribes. There the field of selection is mainly restricted in two ways. On the one hand in some communities there exists the code of preferential mating, i.e. enjoining having a marriage partner standing in a particular relationship as more desirable or at times even obligatory, and on the other hand prohibiting conjugal or sexual relations with a mate standing in a certain relation, such intra-patrilineal sexual contacts are tabooed and are stamped incestuous or ethically undesirable.

Besides, in most of the communities it is also restricted by the social code of endogamy and exogamy in which the marital unions are allowed or disallowed within the bounds of certain groups or outside of them. However, in terms of exogamous considerations the tribals do not have the restriction such as sib, totam, habitation, gotra or sapinda, etc. which are so conspicuously observed by Aryan tribes. The tribals being a casteless society, considerations of castes and sub-castes too are not found there. The only consideration that is taken into account, in some communities, is that of *thar* or clan or *rhus* a patrilineal group. As such, the scope of selection of a mate is considerably wider among these people. Moreover, the tribal communities like Golangs of Siang and Subansiri (NEFA) in which, besides other, a mother-in law and her sister can be taken as a mate. Among the Kukies of Assam, marriages are held even with step sisters and parallel cousins (Rashtrabhasa Prachar, vol.3, No 8, p.208)

Endogameous restrictions, as we find among caste Hindus, are not there, though the tribal restrictions are found in most of them. But the exogamous principle prohibiting marriages between mates of the same blood as a prevention of incest, is, of course, operative in most of the communities. Most of the non-Mongoloid tribes of Nepal are endogamous in the sense that among them normally, marriages take place within the tribe itself, but they are exogamous in respect of their thars (clans). Consequently, among

them marital relations are not allowed within the clan groups. However, the incestuous prohibition regarding cousin marriage is not uniform. In some it is total, i.e. forbidden for all categories of cousins, both parallel and cross, and in others it is partial, i.e. nearly always limited to those known as cross couplings, viz. between respective children of brother and sister. There too, a discrimination is attested between the children of maternal uncle and paternal aunt.

1.9.1 Cross-cousin as a Preferential Mate

A bird's eye-view of the selection of cross cousins as a preferential mate for the purpose of marital bond in the Indian context may briefly be pointed out that although under the Brahmanical order Hindu Shastras, particularly Smritis dealing with Hindu social codes have, vehemently opposed a marital relations between the children of mother's brother and father's sister, yet in the ancient Sanskrit and Pali literature we come across a number of instances of cross cousin marriages that have been taking place in almost all parts of the country, particularly in kingdoms falling outside the jurisdiction of Madhya Desh (middle region) like Magadha, Kashi, Kaushala, Malva, Vidarbha, Saurashtra, Sauriva and Matsya. For instance, among the Pandavas, Arjuna married his mother's brother's daughter, Subhadra, and so did his son Abhimanyu and his brother Sahadeva. The custom of cross cousin marriage seems to be permissible among Yadavas as well. Shri Krishna married his mother's brother's daughter, Rukmini and so did his son Pradyumna and his grand son Aniruddha. Besides, Shri Krishna also married Bhadra and Mitravinda, both of whom are said to be his father's sister's daughters.

Marriage with the mother's brother's daughter was the standard type of union with the eastern people among whom Pali literature mostly developed. For two generations in the family of Shakyas, those of Buddha and his father, there were marriages only with a person's mother's brother's daughters. This was due to exchange of sisters for two generations. There are many references in Pali and Prakrit literature of this type of marriages or love affairs. References to cross cousin marriage are found in the works of Sanskrit dramatist Bhasa and novelist Dandin as well (Kapadia, K.M. 1981:132). Kapadia concluding his observations on this type of marital relations states, "To sum up, cross cousin marriage outside the families of the Yadavas and Pandavas appears to have been rare in Brahmanical tradition and literature. But this form of

preferential mating was quite in vogue among the Chitpavan Brahmins and a few other castes of Maharashtra till recent. Moreover, even now, the Kathis of Kathiyawar are said to prefer marriage with the mother's sister, so is the case of Chhetris of Nepal.

Besides the above, the custom of cross cousin marriage is an extensively socially acknowledged mode of selection of a mate. This has even full sanction from certain authorities on Hindu codes. (cf. *dakshane matulikanya uttare mamsabhakshanam* i.e. marriage with maternal uncle's daughter and eating meat in the north is a religiously permissible code). Baudhayana too has recorded the currency of this form of marriage among the people of South India.

Among the tribes of Himalayan countries under consideration, the currency of this form of marital relations is attested in almost all the tribes, racially may be Aryan or Mongoloid. However, in some communities selection of sexual mates from both sides, paternal and maternal, is permissible, but in some it is restricted to maternal side only.

The principle tribes of Nepal, with local variations, falling under the jurisdiction of cross-cousin marriages permitting selection of mates from both sides are Tamangs, Gurungs, Thakalis, Sherpas, and in India, the principle tribes falling under this category are Shawkas (eastern Bhotias), Kinauras, Lahulas, Spitiens, Ladakhis and Dokpas.

But in the following communities it is only one sided, i.e. among them marriage with maternal cross cousin is fully permissible and preferential too, but marital relations with father's sister's daughter is strictly prohibited and is declared as incestuous. They are Ranas, Thakuris (Chhetris), Danuwars, Chepangs, all from Nepal and Wanchos of Arunachal Pradesh. Thakalis of Nepal not only marry the cousins of the same generation but of different generations as well.

1.9.2 Avoidance of Patrilineal Group

Buddhists of Lahul being a casteless society, there the main consideration in the matter of selection of spouse is only avoidance of *rhus*, the lineage group, there being no concept of clan or *gotra* as such, i.e. in this community a person, male or female, as per rule of descent, belongs invariably to the *rhus* (bone) of his father. Consequently, even flirting with a man or woman of one's own *rhus* is an unpardonable social crime and is like commitment of incest. As such in the matter of selection of a mate too, it is the

top most consideration, i.e. choice of a spouse is strictly forbidden within the same *rhus*.

But, on the other hand, though not as preferential, as in many tribal communities, cross-cousin marriage, both from paternal (FS) as well as maternal (MB) sides is socially recognised one. Its existence is fully confirmed by the absence of kinship terminologies in respect of these relations. The only taboo, other than the *rhus* in respect of selection of a mate is the mother's sister's family. However, due to the prevalence of the exchange marriage system, there is no taboo in selecting a spouse from the family of sister-in-laws.

In respect of exogamy too, it has been found that the members of this community, though strictly adhere to the code of *rhus* exogamy, yet are quite indifferent to village exogamy. There are instances in which the spouses have been taken from the next door neighbour's family, belonging to a different *rhus*.

1.9.3 Selection from within the Community

In the Dokpa (*Brogpa*) community of Ladakh, there being no restriction to village endogamy, in most of the cases matrimonial alliances are contracted between the families of the same village by the heads of the households when the prospective brides and bridegrooms are still under age. The outer exogamy extends to the other Buddhist Dard villages of the Brogyul only. Moreover, it being a casteless society the question of inter-caste marriage does not arise there.

In this context it may also be mentioned that due to restricted choice from within the community, cousin marriages and marriages between near relations too are quite common in Huna. There the prevalence of the practice of cousin marriage is evident from the connubial kinship terms used in Brokskad, the language of these Buddhist Dards.

1.9.4 Compensation for not entertaining Preferential Mates

It may be interesting to note that communities in which cross cousin marriage is a preferential or obligatory marital bond the party not agreeing to this relationship has to pay a compensation for it. For instance, among Danuwars, where this relationship is almost obligatory, the parents of the girl, refusing to enter into this bond, have to pay a compensation to the parents of the boy for breaking their tribal tradition.

Similarly, among Gurungs too traditionally the cross cousin

marriage is not only preferential, but also obligatory, a choice for the mate has to be made from this relationship only. In case of an arranged marriage if the cross cousins are not involved, then the party not agreeing to it has to pay compensation for it.

Moreover, curiously enough, among Limbus of Nepal like Nagas of Assam, marriage with mother's younger sister too was socially permissible. It was fully in vogue till C.1896 when it was banned by law by the king Rajendra Vikram Shah. Although the elders of the Limbu community strongly protested against promulgation of this order and also submitted a memorandum to the authorities to this effect, though it was not entertained by the then Govt. (Janaklal, C. 2039:49)

1.9.5 Winning a Bride in Verbal Dual

Among Rais and Limbus of Nepal a prospective groom even wins a prospective bride by outwitting her in a verbal (versified) dual which takes place in an open place with a full view of the public. For this competition both, the aspiring groom and the bride, stand face to face and sing choicest impromptu couplets turn by turn. If the boy fails to come out with a verse instantly, he stands to lose the chances of his winning the girl as his bride. As such, it is evident that in such a verbal dual only a boy who is intelligent and witty enough to outwit the girl can succeed in winning a bride of his fancy. In case of outwitting the girl, and finally this fact being admitted by her, she is supposed to be his bride and is consented to be so by her parents. All formalities of marriage are, as usual, observed later on an auspicious day conveniently. But now this form of selection of a bride is becoming rare.

1.9.6 Selection of Mates through

In many tribal communities there are community centres which help in match making of their youths. For instance, Ghotul among Muriyas; Changar Baisa among Bhuiyas; Gitora among Mundas and Hos; Dhum Kuriya among Uraons; and Murung among Nagas of Assam. However, among Himalayan tribes of central and western Himalayas existence of this type of match making centres is attested among the eastern Shawkas of Uttarakhand only. There the community centres were known as Rang-bang which used to be the hubs of the youth activities till the first half of the twentieth century. In these youth clubs, situated at the outskirts of the village, youths of the community could come in the evenings for recreation and selection of life partners of their liking. It was a well intended institution which not only served the purpose of recreation for

unmarried young boys and girls, but also provided them opportunities to find a match for themselves of their liking.

Traditionally, every village of Shawkas in Darma, Chaudans and Byans used to have a *Rang-bang Chyimi* at the out skirt of the village where, normally, unmarried young boys and girls could go for recreation and merry making and stay there for the whole night singing, dancing and drinking. At places these centres could be shared by youths of more than one village. Sherring (1906:105) notes that "girls start going Rang-Bang from the age of ten years and practically never sleep at the home after this age". In this context Mr. Randhawa, M.S. (1970:122) the then commissioner of Kumaun also writes, "the eastern Bhotias of Byans and Darma are romantic people. They have the delightful marriage institution of Rang-Bang and are infact the only people in the Kumaun Himalayas who resemble the European people in the practicing free love and their women have the option of selecting their life companion".

Primarily, its doors were open for the youths of the Shawka community only, but in some cases a non-Shawka youth too could attend it, if duly permitted to do so by the female manager of the centre. Similarly, though primarily it was intended for unmarried youths only, but according to Majumdar, D.N. (1958:273) marriage was no bar to attending Rang-Bang. Young girls after marriage do not want to cut themselves of from the romantic life in the Rang-Bang".

As pointed out above, these match making centres were managed and supervised by young experienced ladies of the community, who used to keep an eye on the activities of the participants and strictly checked undesirable activities if any, though otherwise they had full liberty of joking, singing, dancing and merry making, but at the same time they were never allowed to cross the limits of decency. According to Randhawa M.S. (1970:146), however, "unmarried girls and the married women who have not become mothers have the privilege of managing the club."

As the main purpose of maintaining these centres was, besides recreation, to provide opportunity to young boys and girls of marriageable age to meet one another and to develop friendship with the boy or girl of their liking and finally resolve to become life partners of each other. It was on account of this consideration that neither real brothers and sisters, nor the parents of the participants were allowed to attend these sessions of merry making.

As natural the activities of these community centres used to start in the evening after the supper. There, first of all, the youngest female member of the assembly kindled fire in the centrally situated fire place, and all boys and girls assembled there took their seats around it. Then would start the drinking bouts. First of all the Chakti (home brewed liquor) was served in wooden cups to the invitees, then to others. There the girls acted as hosts and the boys as guests. Then started the sessions of singing and dancing which some times continued for the whole night as well, with intermittent bouts of drinks. There were competitions of songs between boys and girls. After being exhausted of songs and dances the participants would sleep there in the *Rang-Bang Chyim* itself. Sometimes these sessions would continue for 2-3 weeks and at the end of it the youths would finalise their choices for their partners and indicated their intention to their parents to which they normally, did not object. The marriages were, however, performed with the drama of elopement, the only traditionally accepted form of marriage in Chaudans, Byans and Darma.

That this institution was an essential part and parcel of the socio-cultural life of the Shawkas may be judged from the fact that it was maintained even in their temporary migratory abodes as well.

Sherring (1906:106) notes "when the Bhotias are travelling or go to their winter quarters, their one of the first consideration is to set apart some spot for the *rang-bang*. If girls wish to invite the boys of the neighbouring village to meet them they wave long sheets, one girl holding one end and the other the other end. This waving can be seen for miles and is really a very pretty custom."

Besides the above, according to Negi, G.S.(1988:71) both, the girls and the boys intending to invite their friends from the neighbouring migratory camps send signals of whistles, produced by putting two fingers each of both the hands in the mouth behind the turned back tongue. On hearing these shrill sounds of whistling they go to meet their friends and acquaintances to the place, specially fixed for these meetings. There the girls bring with them some fire to kindle a *dhuna* (fire place) there. In case they are old friends and acquaintances they sit together with their girl/boy friend, but if not previously acquainted, they sit in two separate groups in a circle facing each other. Then starts the session of Rang Bang around the fire, with drinking, smoking (boys only), singing and dancing. In this, usually boys sing and girls dance

and the session continues till they are exhausted enough. Then they return to their camps, wishing each other to meet again the next day”.

It may also, however, be mentioned here, though there were well established socio-cultural mores for these *Rang-Bang* sessions, yet the abuses of the situation too had crept in with the passage of time. Instances of pre-marital sexual relations and consequent to it births of love children, known as *rang-bang ka khenta/khenti*, were not unknown (Pant S.D. 1935:129). Existence of youth houses is found among the Wanchos of Arunachal Pradesh as well. There, traditionally, all grown up boys and girls sleep at night apart from their homes. There the boys sleep in the Morung, the youth training centre, and the watch house for village youths to fight the enemy in case of an attack. Though for the young girls there are no separate youth houses (Morugs), yet they sleep together separately in the houses of old widow women, known as *nansa-jup-ham* which means ‘young girls’ sleeping house’. These houses usually serve as love making centres as well. For, there the young boys are allowed to meet the girls, to befriend them, make exchanges of gifts and some times pass the night with them. The love affair so developed, normally, culminates into the form of love marriage.

It was on account of these degrading activities of the irresponsible youths that the well meaning institution of ‘*Rang-Bang*’ earned a bad name for it and was ultimately discarded by the enlightened Shawkas of the last generation. Now, it has become almost a thing of past and a part of the past socio-cultural history of the Shawkiyas of Darma, Chaudans and Byans.

1.9.7 Eligibility Test for the Bridegroom

There are certain communities in the Himalayan region in which a prospective bridegroom has to undergo a severe test of physical forbearance to become eligible to have the intended girl as his bride. Some of these have been noted as under:

(i) **Application of Scorpion Grass:** In the Lepcha community of Sikkim a prospective bride applies severe doses of scorpion grass to test the forbearance of the boy intending to marry her. If during the course of this treatment he cries or even utters a single sound to express the feeling of pain, he is outright rejected. In the Golongs community of Assam the prospective bridegroom becomes eligible to have a bride only if he succeeds in killing the *Mithun* (a wild buffalo) with an arrow.

(ii) **Threshing:** According to a peculiar custom of Ladakhis a prospective bride groom had to face severe threshing from the kinsmen of the prospective bride. According to it, till recent past, the bride groom used to go to the house of the bride to bring her to his house to marry her under polyandrous system of marriage.

At the appointed time when he is to approach the girl's house to bring her with him, some kindreds of the bride keep themselves hidden near it, and as soon as the prospective groom approaches the courtyard of the girl's house, they emerge from their hideout and attack him collectively and thresh him well with fists and kicks. He has to bear it calmly without retaliating in any form. During this he, however, winking them tries to escape their attack and enter the house of the girl. There he is again gheraoed by the women folk assembled there and young ones of them try too their might on him. To pacify them he has to offer some money to them. When all these trials are over, he is duly welcomed by all of them and is duly served with tea. In the evening he had to eat with his would be bride from the same plate. Then only he is allowed to take his bride with him and solemnise the marriage at his place. Now under changed circumstances the brutal aspect of the custom may not be there.