



Custom of Fraternal Polyandry in the Lahaula Tribe of Himachal Pradesh: A Folkloric Study with reference to Folk Ballads

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Abstract: A tribe is a society which has distinct characteristics of its own which give them their own identity to the outer world. They have their own set of norms and rules which are pre-defined as per their conditions. They have their own indigenous religion, elements of folklore, language, geographical area and set of beliefs-practices. Beside this they have their own set of laws which are defined as per their customs and are basically followed by the locals. They also have their own set of customs. These customs are gone under phase of modification due to various underlying reasons. Here, such custom is explained which formed a part of Lahaula tribal society in early times and this custom popularity could be discussed while throwing light on their folk ballads which explains performance of this custom at one point of time by Lahaula people. This custom was fraternal polyandry whose relation could be linked with one incident of epic Mahabharata. There were certain reasons of locals because of which they had performed this custom and also there was a reason by which this custom was unfollowed by the locals. All of these discussions related to the custom of fraternal polyandry in Lahaula tribe are explained in the study.

Keywords: custom, fraternal polyandry, tribe, folklore, folk ballads.

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Introduction

Indian society is mainly divided into three divisions based on the socio-economic-geographic dimensions which are tribal, rural and urban societies. Here, we will deal

with the first type of society i.e., tribal society. In general, a tribal society constitutes a special social organization. This organization is unique in its own. They have their own geographical area where they live and maintain their livelihood. A unique social structure, economic pattern, political system, kinship structure, religious system, folklore, language, and set of customs-practices-rituals make their identity distinct. Through this identity they are identified by the outside world. All of their system is maintained, functioned, and regulated by a set of customary laws. These customary laws also give a legal permission to the practices being performed in the tribal society by its members. To understand the overall Indian society, we cannot overlook the part of tribal society. It is needed to fully understand different tribal societies for which we have to look at its past and present. By first looking at the past of a tribal society we can get an idea about the fact of its actual identity and from where it has come from. By looking at present scenario of a tribal society we can get an idea of the fact that how it has been modified in recent years and the underlying reasons through which it has gone under a phase of transition.

Lahaula tribe which is selected for the study is also a tribal society which has its unique area of location, social system, economic system, political structure, religion, custom, language, folklore etc. based on which they had acquired an identity among the people of outer world. Upon analyzing this tribe, we can get an insight of its historical roots. The main objective of conducting the study was to first present a study based on the folklore of Lahaula tribe specially of its folk ballads. Second, to trace the existence of custom of fraternal polyandry present in early times in Lahaula tribe. Third, to analyses those folk ballads of Lahaula tribe of Himachal Pradesh which underline the description of custom of fraternal polyandry being followed by the members of selected tribe. The aim was to trace the historical roots of Lahaula tribe to know the fact that such custom of marriage pre-existed in society of Lahaula tribe.

Literature Review

Several studies had been conducted on the topic of folk ballads and their importance to the people to which they belong. Nandhini (2021) in her study had tried to trace the historical roots of folk ballads. She had stated that folk ballads are a vital part of the cultural heritage of societies around the world and serve as a rich source of information about the social, cultural, and political history of different type of societies. Folk ballads had played a significant role to play in shaping national

and regional identities. She had stated that by studying folk ballads one can gain a deeper understanding of the values, beliefs, and customs of the people who created them.

Apart from this topic many of studies are conducted on custom of fraternal polyandry mainly in the Himalayan regional areas. Antakshari (2021) in her study with regard to custom of fraternal polyandry specific to Kinnaura tribe of Himachal Pradesh had tried to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this custom in the area. She had said that though this custom is slowly losing its ground yet it is still practiced by the people of this tribe. In the study she had qualitatively studied and discussed six case studies of people who had a relation with this custom of marriage out of which two people were polyandrous females, two polyandrous males and two children reproduced from polyandrous households. Parmar (1975) had studied the custom of fraternal polyandry mainly in the region of Himalayas. He had described that marriage based on the practice of fraternal polyandry is common in the areas of Himachal Pradesh like Kinnaur, Lahaul etc. and this was not confined to particular caste or tribe.

Research Methodology

For the study a qualitative study was done with context to Lahaula tribe to get an insight of this tribe. A descriptive and exploratory research design was incorporated while conducting a study on selected tribe. The study presented here, is a small part of my Ph.D. work conducted on the same tribe. The agenda was to dive into the area of folklore of Lahaula tribe to get a real knowledge of it as folklore serves as a medium to understand any tribal society in reality. An ethnographic study was executed on Lahaula tribe for which an in-depth study was done of selected tribe by visiting the field area for about a period of nine months to know the present socio-cultural practices of tribe being performed by its members. A narrative analysis of unstructured interviews conducted with aged locals and local experts was done to record their experiences and learnt behavior to get an actual insight into the past of Lahaula tribe. A transformation in this regard was observed. A content analysis was done of books and articles published either by the British administrators who once had ruled the area just like other Indian states or by local or external writers who had done their part of study on Lahaula tribe.

The main focus was concentrated on the folk ballads of Lahaula tribe as per demand of study. Apart from folk ballads various other elements of folklore of

Lahaula tribe were also studied like dance, song, dress, ornaments, proverb, belief, legend, myth, festival etc. for part of my Ph.D. related work.

Study Area

The main geographical area selected for study was Lahaul sub-division of Lahaul and Spiti district of state of Himachal Pradesh of India. Lahaula are the people who were inhabitants of this part of area. As they reside and belong to Lahaul area they are generally called by outsiders as Lahaula. There are three valleys of Lahaul sub-division based on the natural flow pattern of main river of area called as Chanderbhaga river. They are Chandra, Bhaga, and Chanderbhaga valley. The Chanderbhaga valley locally called as Pattan valley was marked for the detailed study of tribe.

The main area of study was folk ballads of Lahaula tribe which constitutes one part of folklore of tribe. Around forty folk ballads were collected first either from published books and articles or were recorded from the interviews of aged locals who had knowledge of such folk ballads of Lahaula tribe. Out of these forty folk ballads only such ballads were discussed here which described the event of fraternal polyandry happening in early times in selected tribal society.

Folk Ballads

Folk ballads in literal sense translates to *Lok Gatha* in Hindi language. These are the stories narrating about a subject and sung in a form of songs by the folks to which they belong. The main significance of folk ballads is that they narrate the story about a society's culture and history which is important to know as all of the societies in present time are changing. Krishnadev Upadhyaya had stated that 'a folk ballad is a saga or story that is told in songs. He had added that it is very important to have both lyrics and plot in a ballad.'

According to Child (1941), 'Folk ballads are rich sources of cultural and historical information, as they reflect the themes, motifs, and symbols that were significant to the communities where they originated.' Bronner (1986) had found out that folk ballads were transmitted and evolved over time was through oral tradition.

Chakraborty and Choudhary (2021) in their study on Indian folk ballads had quoted features of folk ballads out of which some of the general features are simplicity, narrative, morphological, presented in the form of music-dance, descriptive phrases, impersonal language, represent a particular locality, written by unknown authors and is passed from generation to generation.

Folk Ballads of Lahaula tribe

While talking about the Lahaula tribe there are various elements of folklore which are relevant in the life of its people. Here, only a single part of folkloric elements i.e., folk ballads of Lahaula tribe will be discussed. In general case, folk ballads of Lahaula tribe are the stories that were sung by an individual or a group of people and the rest present people follow them by repeating sentences after they had been sung by the lead group. These stories were related to some famous person, to some mythological creatures, or some God or Goddess. These ballads were usually sung on different occasions like marriage, death, birth, or any other collective occasion. These were sung by general people, not by some musicians, who have a better understanding of how to sing these and a common knowledge about the beats and rhythm. While asking the old locals of Lahaula tribe about the originators of these folk ballads they had replied that it is hard to say that who had created them and on what time were they been created. So, we can say that the folk ballads of Lahaula tribe had an anonymous creator.

While collecting information about the folk ballads of Lahaula tribe, it can be concluded that these group of ballads can be clubbed under two sections. These sections are defined based on which group of people either male or female commonly sing these stories or tales in the form of songs. The two major sections of folk ballads are:

Ghure

Sugli or Sugili

The first group of folk ballads of Lahaula tribe i.e., *ghure* is usually sung by the male members of the tribe while the second group of songs i.e., *sugili* is sung by the female members of the tribe. Here, only the focus will be the first group of folk ballads of Lahaula tribe which is *ghure*.

Ghure of Lahaula tribe

In general way the locals of Lahaula tribe locally called folk ballads by a term *ghure* i.e., *ghure* in common language means folk ballads only. *Ghure* is a folk ballad usually sung by the males of the Lahaula tribe. Usually, an elder male person (*Sehna Mee*) or a group of senior male people sing the *ghure*. After they sing a sentence rest of the male people present in the occasion repeat the same sentence in the same rhythm.

On studying *ghure* of this area one will get enough information about its culture, lifestyle, behavior, tradition, and social values that existed at a particular point in time.

Ghure, in general, could be classified into various types based on the subject they narrate a story about. Some of them describe a specific individual's life, a historical incident, or local deities. These ballads are an amalgamation of different dialects of the Lahaula tribe and of neighboring districts. Apart from the Lahauli dialect, words of different languages and dialects like Bhoti, Kulluvi, Chambyali, Gaddi, etc. are used in these ballads which in a way shows that the people of this tribe had a connection with the people of these areas since early times.

Ghure can be classified under different categories based on whom it is related to, like:

1. *Ghure* related to myths
2. *Ghure* related to local deities, God or Goddess
3. *Ghure* related to rituals done for marriage
4. *Ghure* related to rituals done for deceased
5. *Ghure* related to historical incidents
6. *Ghure* related to special individuals
7. *Ghure* related to embellishment

Based on these categories, several *ghure* were collected with help of conducting interviews with old folks of the tribe and with analyzing the books-articles majored around the topic of folk ballads. Out of them, only those were finalized which in a way gives a description of custom of fraternal polyandry popular in Lahaula tribe.

Fraternal Polyandry in Lahaula tribe

When we talk about the types of marriage based on the number of mates, it can be classified into two parts monogamy and polygamy where in monogamy only one mate is there at one point of time and polygamy concerns with having more than one mates at the same time. This polygamy is further divided into two sub parts; polyandry and polygyny. According to Singh (1978) polyandry term was originated from the Greek term "polyandria" or "polyandrous," which denotes the state of a woman having multiple husbands at the same time. In contrast the term polygyny was derived from Greek term "polygynia," which signifies the state of a man having multiple wives.

Murdock (1957) had defined polyandry as union of one woman with two or more husbands and this union is culturally favored and also involves residential as well as sexual cohabitation. Levine and Silk (1997) had defined fraternal polyandry as the more common and cohesive type of polyandry which involves husbands who are either biological brothers or close kin related while non-fraternal polyandry consists of unrelated husbands.

Ghure describing the custom of fraternal polyandry

While analyzing the themes of collected *ghure* of Lahaula tribe only such ballads were focused upon which were themed around the topic of fraternal polyandry which was quite much in fashion in Lahaula tribe in early times. Only two of the folk ballads were there out of collected forty folk ballads which centered around the custom of fraternal polyandry. The *ghure* presented below under two sections are documented from a book published by Loppa (1994) one of the local experts of Lahaula tribe who had collected these folk ballads with the help of his paternal grandfather in the year of 1985-86. These two *ghure* describing this custom are:

Ghure narrating the story of marriage between families of Bhani and Bhutungru

Sehna hari-ae-mana panja putu-ru jaami
Ae panja putu-ra ae batudi-re teere
Ae panja putu-re ri bara lodi manguna
Ae thari na beeni ae lote ri granve
Sehna hari-ae-mana nusha mangune aaye
Ae handi na pheri ae bhan-e ri ghare
Ae sehna na bhana ae aadure rakhi
Ae sehna na bhana ae puchune laagi
Ae sehna hari-ae-mana kiji kame aaye
Ae jiya mere seba ae nusha mangune aaye
Ae tendune deeva ae nusha mangune aaye
Ae sehna na bhana ae mane raji bhuyi
Ae sehna na bhana ae shaguna kiti
Ae sehna hari-ae-mana apu raji bhuye

The above presented *ghure* is only a part of the whole folk ballad which only discusses the part of doing the engagement ceremony (*shaagun*). This ballad starts

by saying that there was an old man named Hariman. He belonged to Bhani Kula i.e., family of Rangbay village of Pattan valley. He had five sons who were very physically fit and economically sound. All sons of Hariman were at the age of marriage. A beautiful wife is needed for the sons. To fulfill this need, the old Hariman went to the house of another old man named Bhana who belonged to the Bhutungru Kula of Lote village which is also in Pattan valley. By welcoming old Hariman, old Bhana asked the reason for his arrival. After listening to the reason, old Bhana felt happy with the proposal. After three years, the date of marriage was decided for the daughter named Sukhi of old Bhana with the five sons of old Hariman. On the day of marriage, Sukhi started crying. Her mother named Surti and her father Bhana consoled her by stating that she is married to a good family and a good village.

The main points to be highlighted in this *ghure* are that no separate lines were stated that describe the personality or status of the girl. Only her name is listed once in the whole *ghure* while there is a description of five sons showing how well they are physically and economically. This *ghure* describing the marriage ceremony of five sons of old Hariman to one girl of old Bhana indicates that the custom of fraternal polyandry existed in old times in Pattan valley as the two villages mentioned in the *ghure* comes under Pattan valley.

Ghure narrating the story of marriage of two brothers named Karan and Birbal

Lote upuru ae yanguranga granve o
Ae karna birubala bhai re jode o
Ae ase base beni re jode o
Ae karna birubale ri bara lodi manguna o
Ae thari beeni ae kirutinga thari o
Ae base bamuni bara mangune geyi o
Ae base bamuni kirutinga granve o
Ae thari ae beeni ae jashi rame ri ghare o
Ae base bamuni ae jashi rame ri ghare o
Ae bamuna jashi rama puchune lagi o
Ae base bamuni ae kiji kame aye o
Jiya mere seba ae nusha mangune aye o
Tendune deeva ae nusha mangune aye o
Ae bamuna bamuni ae mane raji bhuyi o

Ae deeve mangni byah ye na diti o
Ae bamuna jashi rama shire shaguna kiti o

The above presented *ghure* is only a part of the whole folk ballad which only discusses the part of doing the engagement ceremony (*shaagun*). This ballad starts by narrating that there were two brothers named Karan and Birbal of Yangrang village. They were at the age of getting married. For the selection of a bride, the place of Jashiram in Kirting village was decided. Two sisters not mentioned whether they were the real sisters or cousins of Karan and Birbal went to the house of Jashiram to give the proposal. Upon hearing the reason for their arrival, the parents of the girl were happy. After three years, marriage preparation was done. On the farewell, when the girl cries, the same things are said to her by her parents that she is married in a good place and she must spend her remaining life in that new house only.

The main points to be highlighted after analyzing this *ghure* are that this story related to the marriage of two real brothers with one girl again underlines the existence of custom of fraternal polyandry in this tribal area. Here, the sisters of the groom go to the house of Jashiram to put the proposal of marriage of his daughter with their brothers. So, this shows that sisters or any other female relatives can also go in search of a bride if no other choice is available. Again, no separate mention of status and personality of the girl even her name is there while there is a description of personality and wellness of two brothers in the *ghure*.

Present Scenario of Lahaula tribe

On observing the Lahaula tribe mainly the village of Shansha and its closer village area like Jahalman, Lote and Rangbay no such families were there who had practiced the custom of fraternal polyandry during the time of study i.e., from 2021 to 2024. Even while talking to the old locals, they had stated that they had not seen this custom being followed by the people since last ten years. Also, when the locals were asked about these two *ghure* most of them had no complete information about it that what it consists of, and when they have heard it singing. In the present time, very few Lahaula people who know the whole ballad (*ghure*) are alive. In place of them, several other sources of entertainment are used nowadays by the people on occasions where they were usually sung in early times. The folk ballads are slowly and silently losing their influence from the daily lives of Lahaula people.

While talking to the old people of Lahaula tribe about the thing that why custom of fraternal polyandry was being followed by the people in early times in the

area. They had stated that it was mainly practiced due to certain underlying reasons which are:

1. Fear of people of getting their paternal property divided into parts on bringing separate wives for all brothers.
2. Fear of people that more females in a family may cause more chances of family disputes and conflicts.
3. Faith of people that under this custom all brothers in a family often stay united for years with their paternal land area.
4. Belief of a polyandrous female that she has the sole dominance in the whole family and on all brothers.
5. Belief of a polyandrous female that whole of the paternal property will finally come to her children and not to the children of other females in her family.
6. Belief of locals that early people of the tribe may have been influenced by the story of Draupadi and her five husbands as most of the cultural elements of Lahaula people have been influenced by the incidents of Mahabharata.

While talking to the folks of Lahaula tribe that why this custom is not been practiced in recent years by the people anymore, they had quoted several factors responsible for it:

1. Local women getting educated formally in institutions.
2. Local women getting a chance to explore outer areas' culture.
3. Local women getting a chance to stand on their own feet economically.
4. Local men getting a chance to acquire other professions beside farming activity.
5. Local men getting a chance to explore culture of other areas.
6. Local men getting a chance to not only depend solely on their paternal property.

Relevance of the Study

The presented paper had tried to outline the custom of fraternal polyandry in Lahaula tribe in early times. The study is helpful to understand why this custom was being followed by the people and how it had lost its part from the lives of local people. How this custom played a role in the lives of Lahaula people was shown with

the help of folk ballads which were popular at one point of time among the people. The study had tried to incorporate topic of folk ballads with the folk custom part of Lahaula tribe.

Conclusion

From the studies conducted on the areas of Himalayan region it can be concluded that the custom of fraternal polyandry was a significant part of the people of the area. As Lahaula tribe also comes under the same region this tribal area was not different and the custom was an inseparable part of the tribal people. This custom was so much a part of the tribe that some of its folk ballads which were based on the marriage related practice were based on this custom. These folk ballads in a way also supports the custom of fraternal polyandry in its own way. But the tribe had undergone some significant changes and many of its marriage related patterns had been changed due to certain reasons. Similarly, fraternal polyandry type of marriage custom had also undergone into an extinct mode in present time and all of the people living in the study area had changed their mentality to the institution of monogamous marriage.

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