

Polyandry and its Practice in Premodern Sri Lanka

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Received: 20 June 2014
Accepted: 13 August 2015

Abstract

The history of human society is nothing but the description of the evolution and diffusion of various institutions designed toward perpetuation, maintenance and survival of society. The institution of marriage occupies a unique place in the realm of institutions and it is this institution which is instrumental in perpetuating human society through regulations of conjugal and filial ties. The institution of marriage is as old as creation of the world. As a social institution, it has taken different forms in different societies from time immemorial. The chief sources of our knowledge about the institution are the literary and archaeological data which give us a glimpse of the picture regarding progress in this sphere. There were various forms of marriage in ancient Sri Lanka such as love marriage, monogamous marriage, political marriage and polyandry etc. In the present study, attention will be focused mainly on Polyandry system up to the Kotte period in Sri Lanka as marriage and the males in partnership as husbands and the woman shared as wife. The meaning and definitions of polyandry, forms of polyandry, reasons for polyandry, the origin of this practice and the Sri Lankan context on Polyandry will be discussed in this article. The research will be mainly based on primary sources and wherever necessary material will also be obtained from limited secondary sources published on the marriage system of the island.

Key words: Polyandry, Marriage, Social institution, Adelpic polyandry, Social insecurity

Introduction

The history of human society is nothing but the description of the evolution and diffusion of various institutions designed toward perpetuation,

maintenance and survival of society. The institution of marriage occupies a unique place in the realm of institutions and it is this institution which is instrumental in perpetuating human society through regulations of conjugal and filial ties. The institution of marriage is as old as the origins of the world. As a social institution, it has taken different forms in different societies from time immemorial. The chief sources of our knowledge about the institution are the literary and archaeological data which give us a glimpse of the picture regarding the progress in this sphere.

Some scholars have dealt with marriages of different periods in history of Sri Lanka. M. B. Ariyapala in his work *Society in Medieval Ceylon as depicted in the Saddharmaratnāvali and other Sinhalese literature of the thirteenth century*, published in 1956, compared some passages in his sources with those of the Anuradhapura period. (Ariyapala, 1956: 292-301). Similarly *Culture of Ceylon in Medieval Times*, a posthumous work of W. Geiger has briefly dealt with marriage using a few lines in two pages on Social Organization and Caste System during the Anuradhapura of *Mahāvamsa*. (Geiger, 1960: 37-38). Geiger's study is based almost exclusively on the main chronicle. For example, H. Ellawala has done research on the period from the fifth century BC to the fourth century AD. (Ellawala, 1969:). He has tried to analyze the marriage system of early Sri Lanka under the family organization. He has described marriage under the subtitle of traditions, pertaining to the age of marriage in Indian society, relationship of the ideal marriage partners, types of marriage in Indian society, equality of birth as the most important factor for a marriage settlement, polygamy and polyandry, divorce and re-marriage, marriage outside the normal practice, polygamy in Sri Lankan society, and widow marriage. But he says that the numerous lithic records which are still not deciphered are studied carefully and a careful and a systematic archaeological survey is made on the sites of early settlements of this country; But this analysis still remains incomplete. S. B. Hettiaratchi has detailed

study the fourth to the tenth century AD. He has dedicated a chapter on the marriage system of the respective period. He has designed it under the themes such as age of marriage, the customs of marrying daughters, cross-cousin marriage, the selection of marriage partners, and functions of marriage, love marriage, marriage of the ordinary people, dowry system and political influence and marriages. (Hettiaratchi, 1988: 55-88). In this article, an attempt is made to study the marriage and society in terms of polyandry approximately from the thirteenth century AD to the end of sixteenth century AD.

First the author has referred to the popular definitions of polyandry. According to the opinion of Sarva Daman Singh, the parent of the English term "polyandry", is made up of "poly+andr-, anēr+ia-y", referring to the "condition of [a woman] having many men", is a Greek word polyandria derived from polyandrios. Its antonym polygyny is composed of poly and gynia, signifies "the condition of a man having many women. Neither of the two words contains any etymological connotation of marriage. "Polygamy" is usually understood in the sense of a man marrying more than one woman, comes from poly and gamia meaning "many marriages", and in deep sense cover both polyandry and polygyny. (Singh, 1978: 27). Singh says quoting McLennan's statement that polyandry is used to imply the marriage of one woman to more than one man.

... It gives men wives. Till men have wives they may have tastes, but they have no obligations in matters of sex. You may be sure polygyny in the earlier stage never had the sanction of group opinion. They would all envy and grieve at the good of their polyginious neighbour. Polygyny, then did not at first give men wives. Wifedom begins with polyandry which is a contract. (Singh, 1978: 27).

Lubbock described polyandry as something “far from easy to distinguish between communal marriages a true polyandry”. (Singh, 1978: 28). Spencer thought polyandry “as one of the kinds of marital relations emerging from the primitive unregulated state; and one which has survived where competing kinds, not favoured by the conditions, have failed to extinguish it.” (Singh, 1978: 28). Briffault mentioned it as a remnant of group marriage. (Singh, 1978: 28). Sumner, Keller, Vinogradoff and Westermarck considered polyandry as a consequence of harsh living conditions. (Singh, 1978: 28). Westermarck opinioned his opposition to McLennan's notion of polyandrious evolution in the statement in an article on “Marriage” in the *Encyclopaedia Sexualis*. (Singh, 1978: 27)

To explain polyandry is to trace its causes and when this has happened, it is found that certain circumstances lead to unions in which the husbands are brothers and other circumstances to unions in which they are not so; but I see no reason whatsoever to assume that the former kind of union has developed out of the latter. It would indeed be rather surprising if a people so cultivated as the Nayers had preserved the primitive form while lower castes living in the same neighbourhood had grown out of it and changed their polyandry into fraternal. (Singh, 1978: 28).

According to the views of *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, two varieties of polyandry are generally recognized; in one of which husbands are brothers, while in the other they are not necessarily related to one another. (Hastings, 1964: 426). N.D. Wijesekera considered polyandry as an unexpected and unnatural form of human behaviour of society that one needs to examine the practice very carefully to ascertain its origin. (Wijesekera, 1967: 24). He has mentioned that it was practiced by many primitive peoples and continues among several tribes at a low level of culture. (Wijesekera, 1967: 24). He has mentioned

that there are varieties of polyandry. In the new world, cases of such practice of one woman being married to several men at the same time can be observed among certain South American Indian groups. This practice is also obvious among Eskimos in the Alaskan coast. In the Canary Islands group most women in the Island of Lancerate have three husbands who wait upon them alternately by months. (Wijesekera, 1967: 24). The practice is found in Madagascar among a few people of the continent of Africa, in some localities of the Malayan Archipelago and certain South Sea Islands. In the Marshal Islands and the Marquesas it has been practiced in large scale. (Wijesekera, 1967: 24) Strabo asserts that polyandry prevailed in Arabia-Felix. It occurs chiefly in India and its neighbourhood, and in Africa among the bahima and Bazito people. But the only definite example of polyandry, Wijesekera says as recorded in Africa occurs among a pastoral people whose culture possesses several features resembling that of the Todas very closely. In ancient time polyandry has been recorded among Arabs, Britons during Caesar's time, Picts and Guanches. (Wijesekera, 1967: 24).

Wijesekera described another form of polyandry which is related directed to monogamy. First husband is the chief husband in that form of polyandry. The other man or men who share the same woman act as husband and master of the house in the absence of the true lord. (Wijesekera, 1967:25). These husbands are not brothers. It is a caretaker arrangement necessitated by circumstances. Among the Nayars, a non-fraternal type of polyandry occurred, according to the under mentioned statement. "Among the Nayars a girl goes through the form of marriage with a man but later consorts with a number of other men who need not be related to one another. This can be better described as Cicusbei". Another form of polyandry has been mentioned by Wijesekera which occurred in India in which a young boy marries a wife who consorts with the boy's father or maternal uncle or some other man. (Wijesekera, 1967:25). The wife's offsprings are

considered as children of the boy-husband. When the boy becomes an adult, he will consort with the wife either of one of these children or of some other boy. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Nayers of Cochin, Malabar and Travencore practiced non fraternal type of polyandry. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. VIII, 178). According to the Nayar usage every girl, before she attained puberty, was subjected to a marriage ceremony, after which the nominal husband went his way and she was allowed to co-habit with any Brahmin or Nayar she chose. Usually, she had several lovers who co-habited with her by agreement among themselves but they did not live with her. According to the above analyzed facts, there was more than one type of polyandry. McLennan introduces the above two forms of polyandry as Tibetan, which is called fraternal type and it is also known as adelphic and Nayar as non-fraternal type. (Hastings, 1964: 427). The eldest brother is regarded as the principal husband in the fraternal type of polyandry. He chooses the wife and the contracts may confer matrimonial rights on all the other brothers. If these were brothers the eldest takes the lead and the various husbands live or co-habit in turn. Wijesekera says that there was a definite system of polyandry which was of Todas where she becomes the wife of all the brothers even of those born after the marriage. Polyandry of the fraternal type was practiced in Tibet and the neighbouring regions in the North. Usually, the eldest son of the family marries and as his brothers grow up they share his wife with them. Even if one of the younger brothers takes a wife, she becomes also the wife of the other brothers among the Todas. (Hastings, 1964: 427). In Tibet, as practiced in ancient time, the husbands are blood related brothers who live in the same household as members with their common wife. This is the general pattern frequently adopted in the Himalayan region from Assam to the dependencies of Kashmir, chiefly among the people of Tibetan affinities. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. XVIII, 178). As has been pointed out earlier, the type of polyandry custom in Sri Lanka is of the Tibetan pattern.

Some scholars have pointed out the reasons for polyandry. Hayley observes : "It is one of the peculiar features of Kandyan custom that polyandry should have continued to be not merely tolerated but openly recognized and approved throughout the growth of the civilization which was reached in Ceylon." (Hayley, 1993: 170). Sing expresses the principle causes quoting *The History of Human Marriage of Westermarck*.

The first of these causes is the disequilibrium in the ratio of the sexes. There may be more men than women in a given society of reasons. Affluence is said to breed more females, and austerity males. Female infanticide may disturb the sex ratio, as does the selling of women out side the community. A sizeable immigration of male bachelors may also result in a scarcity of women, which may be accentuated by female deaths in child-bearing, or by the practice of polygyny among some peoples. (Sing, 1978: 29).

The second reason was economic. As has been pointed out by Sing, an inhospitable and poor terrain may necessitate curbs on the growth of population. (Sing, 1978:29). Where fragmentation of small properties would lead to economic perdition, the need to keep the family property undivided would make polyandry a panacea. It would reinforce the bond of fraternity and ensure the pooling of property and man power for purposes of production. Radcliffe- Brown mentioned about adelphic polyandry in terms of the unity and solidarity of the sibling group. When the wealthy practice polyandry that is because they want to keep their wealth undivided, and their influence unimpaired. When the bride price in some areas is too high for a single individual to afford, many men pool their resources to purchase a common wife. Peter Prince refers to the instance of near polyandry in modern France, where Polish coal miners working in the North clubbed together to have a woman in common.

(Prince Peter, 1963: 62). They all made equal contributions to support her, and were provided an evening meal and a night's entertainment at the woman's quarters, each according to his turn. There was no marriage; yet the affinity of such an orderly arrangements with the character of polyandry would be undeniable. Household expenses in some pastoral cultures may be more easily defrayed by pooling the heads of cattle amongst a given numbers of owners, made possible by their collective marriage to one woman. According to Peter Prince, The Toda polyandry provides a conspicuous exception to this proposition. He points out that the Todas have an unusual type of polyandry, apparently divorced from what is elsewhere always the essential correlate of the institution, namely, the non-division of the inherited family property. Toda brothers share one wife in common, but their buffaloes are at the same time individually owned, as is also any other form of property that they may have. (Prince Peter, 1963: 53).

Some people leave homes, because they are engaged in various professions to earn their livelihood. It has also led to polyandry in some societies to ensure protection and support for their wives by their kinsmen. Polyandry was originated as a fraternal character due to this reason. But regarding this case, Nayars polyandry was non- fraternal. Quoting the Sixth edition of *Notes and Quarries of Anthropology*, Sing defines polyandry as the institution or custom by which a woman is permitted to have more than one husband at the same time. It also defines cisibeism as a more or less permanent union of a woman with one or more men without giving them the full status of consort. (Sing, 1978: 33). E. R. Leach emphasizes economic reason as a cause of polyandry. He suggests that adelphic polyandry is to be understood as yet another variation on the same theme. If two brothers share one wife so that the only heirs of the brothers the children born of that wife, then, from an economic point of view, the marriage will tend to cement the solidarity of the sibling pair rather than tear it apart, whereas, if the two brothers have separate wives, their children will have

separate economic interests, and maintenance of the patrimonial inheritance in one peace is likely to prove impossible. (Leach, 1971: 107). He says that further a definition only in terms of legitimacy is inadequate, as several distinguishable classes of rights are discernible in the institutions commonly classed as marriage. The legal and social concomitants of marriage are not always and everywhere identical; and a comprehensive definition of marriage must include several subtypes of the institution. Leach says as follows; On the one hand, we have a formal and legal arrangement, by which, so far as Ceylon is concerned, a woman can only be married to one man at a time... On the other hand we have another institution of marriage, which is entered into quite informally but which nevertheless, by virtue of its public recognition, serves to provide the children with claims upon the patrimonial property of the men with whom the woman cohabits publicly resides... If we accept this second institution as a form of marriage then polyandry in Ceylon is a form of polygamy. If we confine the term marriage to the first institution, polyandry in Ceylon is a form of polykoity. (Leach, 1971: 110).

S. J. Tambiah has conducted a research on Polyandry in Ceylon with special reference to Laggala region. He says that economic factors have mainly caused polyandry. Polyandry in Ceylon as a customary form of marriage establishes the inheritance rights of children, and their full birth status rights common to normal members of their society or social stratum (Tambiah, 1966: 265).

Wijesekera notes the main reasons are behind for such a practice. These are said to be immemorial custom, predominance of women over men, absence of men on travels out of home, cementing marriage, peace and contentment as brothers will not quarrel, celibacy of a large number of men, poverty and avoidance of division of property (Wijesekera, 1967: 27). J. A. Gunaratna

emphasizes more on economic factor as the reason for the emergence of polyandry. He says that the custom is commonly believed to have originated in feudal times, when every householder was bound to give his personal attendance at the royal palace and at the residences of the higher chiefs. During the long intervals of absence enforced on a householder by this duty, it was necessary that someone should remain at home to look after his lands and generally to conduct his affairs, and a brother or some other close relative was usually deputed to perform the duty. This community of property is supposed to have eventually led to the community of wives. (Gunaratna, 1898: 1).

Before coming to the Sri Lankan context, the origin of this practice in India should be examined. Among the Vedic Indians, the practice of polygamy is abundantly proved by the direct reference to it in the *Ṛigveda* and other ancient texts. However, monogamy is recognized as normal and that having extreme faithfulness to one man and one wife. That is why chastity was held in such high regard as the essential virtue of Indian womanhood. No clear traces of the practice of polyandry can be discerned from ancient texts. The classic example is that of the five Pāṇḍava brothers, heroes of the *Mahābhārata* epic who are represented as marrying Draupadi and having her as wife in common. This happened under certain special circumstances. The position is elaborately explained and defended in the epic. Later, this form of polyandry is defended by Bṛahaspati (*Bṛahaspatismṛti*, 1941, XVII, 20) as practiced in the South and by Āpastamba (*Āpastamba Dharma Sūtra*, 1898: II. XXVII, 2) as an antiquated use. It is interesting to remember the region as South and the reasons as special circumstances and antiquated use. The practice was never widely spread among the tribes of early Sri Lankan culture. JatilaGautami had seven husbands and Varkshi married ten brothers. Asvin shared Sūrya with his twin brother. Wijesekera has mentioned that a similar practice is still found among Brahmins. (Wijesekera, 1967: 26). Rajput and Sindras are similar to Kumaon where the

