



MARRIAGE AND CHANGING PATTERN AMONG THE CHANGPA TRIBE OF LADAKH



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ABSTRACT

The present study is an attempt to understand at its micro level the marriage and its changing pattern among the Changpa tribe of Ladakh of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. This paper will attempt to understand the social relationships involved in the marriage of Changpa Tribe of Ladakh with a specific focus on rules, norms and patterns that govern the construction of social relationship in the marriage system.

KEYWORDS: *Tribe, Social Stratum, Polyandry, Married, Wife, Phaspu*

INTRODUCTION

Keeping in view the nature and objectives of the study, the type of information sought, the geographical area to be covered as well as the time duration, an exploratory-cum-descriptive research design has been adopted. For the collection of the reliable first-hand information, the observation method, case studies and oral history has been applied so that the facts regarding the marriage and its changing pattern of the Changpa tribe can be traced out. Kargyam region is mainly composed of four villages i.e. *Sato, Chepra, Parma and Kherapulu* with 109 households and an estimated 550 persons. These four villages have been constituted the universe for the present study and a sample of 50 has been drawn from these four villages: 15 from Sato, 15 from Parma and 10 each from *Kherapulu and Chepra* following the random sampling method.

Changpa Tribe is primarily dominant in eastern part of Ladakh, which is popularly known as the Changthang, located nearly Indo-china border. Ladakhi Changthang an area of approximately 21,000 km² (Jina 1995, 1999; Bhasin 1996) is situated at an average height of 4,500 meters above the sea level. Nomads of Changthang in general and Kargyam in particular are pastoral nomads.

TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE PATTERN

Marriage is an important social institution and therefore we need to assign a definition to it so that it has a universal reference and application. But it is very challenging task to draw out the marriage institution based on a particular definition as it varies from scholars to scholars. But Gough (1959:32)¹ preferred to modify the definition of marriage in the following words. "Marriage is a relationship established between a woman and one or more other persons, which provides that a child born to the woman under circumstances not prohibited by the rules of the relationship is accorded full birth-status right common to normal members of his society or social stratum". This definition enlarges the scope of viewing marriage in a broader context than other definitions. It would include the cases of the marriage among the Changpas tribe of Ladakh.

For various reasons, Changpas consider marrying as essential part of life. One essential reason is that when the parents become old, they need additional hands to look after the family and its properties. The requirement is fulfilled through marriage. Second consideration is to have children who will maintain the



line of descent. Thirdly, they feel marriage regularize sex relations. It is feared that there would be chaos if sex relationship is not regulated through marriage. In most of the cases the age of husband is far less than the wife. It is because of the practices of polyandry in the society. When the eldest brother marries, the younger brother

joins in later and shares the same wife, may be very young in age. Because of this age-old practice people do not mind having wives older to them.

Notes

¹ E.K. Gough (1959) *The Nayars and the Definition of Marriage, Journal of Royal Anthropology Institute* 89: 23-34

Table 1.1: Distribution of Respondents by Marital-Status

Marital status	Sato (Fre.)	Parma (Fre.)	Kherapulu (Fre.)	Chepra (Fre.)	Total	
					(Fre.)	%
Unmarried	01	02	03	03	09	18
Married	09	10	07	06	32	64
Widowed	02	03	-	-	05	10
Divorced	03	-	-	01	04	08
Total	15	15	10	10	50	100

According to the data, majority of the respondents are married. However, the data on marital status (Table 1.1) reveal that there are 18 per cent respondents who are not married, some of them are underage to marry. Yet, majority comprising 64 per cent of the sample are married. The data also show remaining 10 per cent as widowed and 8 per cent respondents as divorced. Out of this 12 per cent are polyandrous and this comprises 6 families.

AVENUES TO MARRIAGE: *Te-Chang*

The first formal step is to consult a religious specialist, monk (astrologer) for the future prospects of the match on the basis of the birth year (*Loh*) of both girl and boy; if the readings of the two are supportive the match is approved. A monk or elderly person who is well versed in astrology is consulted for predicting an auspicious day to seek the proposal to girl's family. After that, in the conclusion of any alliance, the proposal is made by the father and maternal uncle of the boy to the girl's parents. This proposal is called *Te-Chang*. Few liters of *Chang*, a ring or gift for the girl and a white scarf (*Katak*) are carried along. The girl's parents have three choices. They may refuse to accept the beer (*Chang*) and indicate their opposition to the proposal, a course usually taken only if the request is unexpected and the girl herself is disinclined to accept the proposal. Alternatively her parents may accept the *Chang* and tell the visitors that they will think about the proposal and consult their daughter. The third possibility is the acceptance of both the *Chang* and the proposal, and this happens in cases when informal agreement has already been reached or the young people have been lovers for some time. In this case, the ceremonial proposal only regularizes an existing situation. *Meme Chotak*¹ (73) mentioned that:

"In the earlier day's one had to seek the proposal (*Te-Chang*) for the minimum of 8 times but now with the change of time, it is for 2-3 times that one seek the *Te-Chang*. If the proposal is accepted by the family of a girl, then boy's party need to take *Chang* and *Khatak* to all the relatives of girl's family as recommended by the girl's family."

According to their custom if the girl's marriage is performed at her parental residence she is to be given more gifts (*Rak-Tak*). Because of this most of the marriages are solemnize to girl's maternal uncle or any relative's house which helps minimize the *Rak-Tak* value to a large extend. The very shifting of the girl's marriage to a relative's house indicates that her father is not economically sound to afford all expenses of her marriage. With this background in view, more of *Rak-Tak* is not desired.

Notes

² *Meme Chotak* (73), personal interview with the researcher, 2013.

THE WEDDING RITE: *Paks-ton*

The relationship established by the acceptance of a *Te-Chang* proposal are neither inherently permanent nor of legal effectiveness. They can be broken off at any time by either side without incurring a liability to compensation. To put these relations on a more solid basis, they entered into *Paks-Ton* wedding rite. This rite terminates the girl's membership of her parental economic unit and it is at the time of wedding that she is given a share of the family property in the form of gifts (*Rak-Tak*). After the acceptance of *Te-Chang*, boy's family, relatives, neighbour, *Phaspun* and other fellow villagers share hands to prepare the marriage function. *Acho Padma Rigzir*² says "in the earlier days it was the *Phaspun*



who come to help for the marriage party, but now *Phaspun* do not participate much during the marriage party. It is the relatives and neighbor who share hands during the marriage occasion”.

“To select an auspicious day for the marriage, a monk is consulted. A group for marriage party is formed, including father, maternal uncle, one female (*Na-Thea*) to guide and help the bride in various ways and a group of people to sings traditional and marriage songs on the occasion, they are known as *Nyopas*. The boy, who is going to marry, does not join the marriage party rather he stays back in his house awaiting the arrival of bride to the house.”⁴

The time of departure is so adjusted that the bride should enter the bridegroom’s village in the darkness of night she should not enter during the day time’ (R.S.Mann 1986:58)⁵. But there is no such strict rule among the Changpas of Kargyam; the bride can enter the bridegroom’s village any time day or at night as per the date and time mentioned by the monk.

Though during the wedding there are several brief religious ceremonies, the emphasis of the whole procedure is not on the ritual but on the economic aspects of the change. Much of the preparations are concerned with the collection of the gifts which consists not only of the property (*raktak*) of the parents gives to their daughter but also of the gifts of kinsmen, friends and co-

villagers. All such gifts and promises of gift are recorded in a document which also contains all the items of the *Rak-Tak* given by the bride’s parents. Indeed, no distinction is made between the *Rak-tak* and the gifts of kinsmen and friends; both are known as *Nor* (property). People who contribute in this way to the gifts can expect gifts of approximately equal value from the bride groom’s parents or nearest kinsmen when one of their own daughter or son marries. In this way, a chain of obligations is created and the parents of married couple invited on the occasion mainly include the members of those families with whom such a relationship of mutual assistance is already established as well as the new friends whom they wish to draw into the net of reciprocal support.

Notes

³Acho Padma Rigzin, *personal communication*, Sato, July 2013.

⁴Konchok Phunchok, *personal communication*, Parma, December 2013.

⁵R.S.Maan (1986) *The Ladakhi: A Study in Ethnography and Change*, the Director Anthropological Survey of India

AGE AT MARRIAGE

Apart from marriage being almost universal and necessary among the people of Kargyam, early marriage is also common among them. But there is not a single case of child marriage even this kind of system is not prevalent in the nomadic society.

Table No.1.2: Distribution of Respondents by Marital-Age Status

Marital-age status	Sato (Fre.)	Parma (Fre.)	Kherapulu (Fre.)	Chepra (Fre.)	Total	
					(Fre.)	%
Below 18	06	05	03	02	16	32
18-23	06	07	04	04	21	42
23-28		01		01	02	04
28-33	02				02	04
Not married	01	02	03	03	09	18
Total	15	15	10	10	50	100

Table No.1.2 clearly illustrates that 42 percent respondents are between 18-23 years of age and below 18 ages at the time marriage is 32 percent among these 32 percent of respondents are middle and old age people. But the new generations prefer to marry between 20-25 years of age. Through an examination of the data available, clearly indicates that marriage is a necessary and universal among the Changpas of Kargyam. In compare to the elder people, young generations are preferred to marry at the later age.

PATTERNS OF SPOUSE SELECTION Arranged Marriage:-

The marriage that are fixed or arranged by parents or elders on behalf of and / or with the consent of the boy or girl involved the pattern of selecting a spouse and is labeled as arranged marriage. We presume that there was no choice in arranged marriages in traditional society of Changpas. Of course, in a regime of child marriage, a child may not have a choice since this form of marriage is not prevalent in the Changpa community. There are no such rigid rules of not consulting the boys or

girl. In most of the arranged marriage, it was observed that parents ask the boy or girl about the proposal. One of the important attributes of arranged marriage is that before finalizing the marriage proposal, parents match the horoscope of boy and girl if it matches, then the marriage is finalized.

As it is mostly arranged marriage, matters are made clear in advance to avoid any complication at later stage. This way of marrying poses more bindings on the spouses concerned. The chance of dissolution of such marriage is far less in comparison to other forms of marriage avail in Changthang. Among the data available of married people, around 60 per cent of the marriages fall under this category. The practice of such form of marriage is mostly seen among the elder married couple rather than young married couple.

Marriage by Self-Choice:-

In the present context of time, there are more cases of love marriage than arranged marriage. *Azang Zangpo*⁶ narrated, "Ours was love (*zhomson*) marriage and I am from *Hemya* village that is around 200 kms away from Kargyam. Actually I was supposed to get wife to my home but that was not possible for my wife *Angmo* so I came here as a *Makpa* son-in-law because we both loved each other". This procedure grants liberty to the boy and the girl concerned to decide about their union. They fall in love with each other and decide to marry. Their parents may either come into the picture at a late stage. When they are ready to marry, either side of the father and maternal uncle take *Chang* or proposal the other side, in these cases there are less chances of rejecting the proposal as the boy and girl love each other. This form of marriage is simplest than the arranged marriage.

Marriage by Stealing:-

When a marriage does not materialized through mutual consent of the boy and the girl for reason of resistance from either side of parents, an alternative is provided i.e. marriage by stealing (*Ku-zum*). This kind of marriage is more popular among the *Changpas* of Kargyam as it is more economical and simplest one. *Ku-zum* marriage can be love marriage where both boy and girl love each other but either side of the family are not ready to accept the proposal so they opt for this form of marriage. On the other hand if a girl or boy who is not ready for the marriage, other party follows the *Ku-zum* marriage. After the marriage function is over then the boy's marriage party father and maternal uncle take *Chang* to the girl's family, this is done to pacify their anger, if any. The carrying of *Chang* may be repeated if demanded. Other things are settled by offering *Khataks* to girl's family members and

relatives. Here the charges for the bride price may be very high as compared to other forms of marriage.

Marriage by Exchange:-

There are also some cases of acquiring mates through exchange. A girl from family of 'X' gets married to a boy of family of 'Y'. Then the family of 'Y' would spare a girl for a boy of family of 'X'. This is the instance of direct exchange. There is yet another kind of exchange. When there are two girls in a family 'A', with no boy, are married to two real brothers of a family say 'B', one of the brothers remains *Magpa* in family 'A'. At the same time, one girl from family 'A' goes to stay with her husband in family 'B'. The final position supports that a girl has been exchanged for a boy. But in a general, people of Kargyam do not encourage such kind of practices.

Notes

⁶ Azang Zangpo, personal communication, Sato, July 2013.

FORMS OF MARRIAGE

Bak-ma Marriage:-

It is patrilocal practice in the rule; girl is taken to the boy's house after the marriage. This kind of marriage is more popular among the people of Kargyam. It could be both arrange and love marriage. In such cases, marriage proposal or *Te-Chang* is initiated from the boy's side and all the rules of marriage are followed, which have already mentioned in the beginning.

Mak-pa Marriage:-

Under this, boy leaves his parental residence after marriage and goes to stay with the family of his wife. This is mainly resorted to in the absence of male sibling to the wife. Usually the younger son of a family goes for *Mak-pa*. The *Mak-Pa* marriage is, otherwise, done with the view that the daughter's husband would be helpful in looking after the property including land and livestock of the family. Since the life of *Changpa* is very hard being a nomad they need male members in the family to look after the activities of the house. During shifting the camp from one pasture land to another, they need male members to handle the entire hard task, so they bring a boy as *Mak-pa* to their elder daughter. According to customs, the daughter would be the heiress in the absence of son. Being an heiress, she enjoys good position in the family.

Residences apart, the forms of marriage are also decided by the number of husbands and wives. Primarily monogamous, marriage is followed by the *Changpas* of Kargyam but there are also practices of polyandry. Among the various scholars, polyandry practices among the Buddhist community of Ladakh are very popular. Among all these communities, *Changpa* tribe primarily practices

this form of marriage as per their requirements. Changpas are practicing fraternal polyandry where a single woman is commonly shared by maximum of three brothers. But during research, it was observed maximum of two brothers are sharing a single women. In the past, an outsider, other than real brothers could also join the wedlock. Such a man used to be known as *Phorsak* who is inducted in family by the common wife. This was mainly consent by the eldest husband. But in the present study of the Changpas of Kargyam no cases of *Phorsak* could be reported. But now, Changpas discourage *Phorsak* form of practices. That is no more functional among their society and as such they have abandoned such practices.

According to their customary law, when the eldest brother marries, the younger ones can also share the wife as co-husband. There is social sanction for sexual indulgence with the common wife. But during the marriage, only the elder brother and wife are given the *Khatak* and recognized as husband and wife. But the younger brothers join the marriage at the later stage. There no any marriage functions for the recognition of the younger brother as husband among the Changpas of Kargyam. The children born of a polyandrous union call all husbands of a common wife as father making only a distinction of elder and younger. They call eldest father as *Aba* and the younger father as *Agu*. Children are treated as the property of the husbands and are looked after jointly.

Polyandry may be a source of amusement to modern man but there are ample of reasons, in support of polyandry. When we question the parties of a polyandrous arrangement among the Changpa community their answers are clearly linked to economic, environment conditions and other factors.

THE DISSOLUTION OF A MARRIAGE

Marriages among the Changpas of Kargyam are free associations between individuals who have the right to dissolve them when they fail to serve the purpose of giving mutual comfort and happiness. The members of both the sexes are free to divorce. There is no need to perform any ritual while declaring a divorce. Provocation by someone, domestic violence, extra-marital relations, adultery, impotency, barrenness and inadequate protection to wife, especially for food and dress can give rise to divorces.

In fact, like various tribal and semi-tribal communities the Changpa community too has its own village council system which is called the 'council of the elder'. Generally, the dispute cases like divorce are put before the council of elders. When a person is divorced

the arrangement for compensation, is decided by the *Goba* (village head) and others elder members with the consent of the both the parties. Usually, the parties who seek the divorce need to pay compensation for the other side.

Remarriage in case of widow or widower is permitted. The practices of both levirate and sororate exist among the Changpas of Kargyam. In the polyandrous family, the widow is automatically inherited by the next one, without involving any ceremony. In a monogamous union, if the husband passed away, widow with the children does not return to her parental house. She may not even remarry and stay as such. If she is too young and willing to remarry, she can go for the younger or elder brother of the deceased or she can enter into remarriage with other man. There are no practices of wearing any particular dress or symbol for the widow. One cannot observe whether she is widow or not through her dress up. There are same rules and regulations with the case of widower.

THE CHANGING PATTERN

With the passage of time, churning of ideas, values, practices, role, rules and regulation, age at marriage, pattern of selection of spouses, rites of marriages, and issues of divorce and remarriage are on the way to change. The marriage system that was practiced among the Changpas of Kargyam are changing with the time and situation but unlike the other parts of Ladakh, in a fast pace. It is because of its geographical isolation and less interaction among the other parts of Ladakhi society. The following are some of the major changes taken place in the marriage pattern of Changpa Tribe of Ladakh:

- ✧ Even in the case of seeking the marriage proposal, changes has been taken place, that in the earlier days one had to seek the proposal (*Te-Chang*) for the minimum of 8 times but now with the change of time, it is for 2-3 times that one seek the *Te-Chang*.
- ✧ Changes taken place in the transportation as well, according to *Mai Mai Chotak*,⁷ "It took 5-6 days to get the bride back to Sato from Chushul that is around 55 km away from Sato. There were no vehicles at that time and we used to take horses to bring the bride. It used to be a group of 20-25 members in the marriage party. As the horse is pride for the family of Changpas, we decorated horse not less than the bride. But now all that marriage customs has declined, there is no value for the horse as it is replaced by the motorcars. I really feel pity on the horses when I see them full naked. During our days they were

hardly naked. They were always fully decorated and we took great care of them. Now people use cars, scooter and bike etc. rather than a horse. Now a day there is no use of horses during the marriage but in our days one could not think of marriage without horse.” In the earlier days marriage function was a long process but in the present scenario it is very easy and handled in a short period of time.

- ✧ Earlier people prefer to engaged in the arrange marriage where parents were shown great respect and their consent has been required. But now love (*rang-thadkan*) and stealing (*kuzum*) marriage is replacing the traditional arrange marriage system. They fall in love with each other and decide to marry. Their parents may either come into the picture at a late stage. When they are ready to marry, either side of the father and maternal uncle take Chang or proposal the other side, in these cases there are less chances of rejecting the proposal as the boy and girl love each other. If in cases either side of the parents is not ready to accept the proposal then they follow the *kuzum* marriage as the last resort. This kind of marriage is more popular among the Changpas of Kargyam as it is more economical and simplest one.
- ✧ Under the traditional social system of nomad, a great importance was given to polyandrous families. Such families were, at one time, given superior social status. Polyandrous unions earned appreciation from one and all. It also provides more freedom to women while living in such wedlock as there was no chance of their liberty being curtailed.
- ✧ From the field research in the area it has been gathered that polyandry is towards decline for various reasons. An anti-polyandry climax was further generated by the new avenues of economics independence. By now, there are ample of opportunities of earning for men as well as for women. The growing economic independence has adversely affected to the practice of polyandry. Many a young men are not ready to carry out further their parent’s jobs of herding as nomad. They prefer to do unskilled work in army camps, General Reserve Engineer Force (GREF) and for contactors. There are around 24 young men who doing the jobs of driving trucks. These people did not prefer

polyandrous marriage rather they preferred monogamous marriage. Their contact with outsiders has also lead to decline of polyandry. The outsiders just deplored and condemned the custom. The outsiders viewed polyandry from their own cultural background and found it out rightly immoral and disgraceful. So the Changpas discouraged and feel ashamed in practicing polyandry. Even some polyandrous families during the field research tried to conceal the fact.

- ✧ The rapid expansion of formal education has indirectly led to the conditions unfavorable to polyandry. When the educated youth of Changpas got into regular employment, they preferred to keep their independent wife, rather than sharing a common one. Among the educated lot, there is an increasing realization that polyandry is not a good custom and that it should be done away with. All this paved way to monogamous marriage.
- ✧ In the past, when there were divorces, the compensation was made in goods. But now a day’s compensation is made through cash as well as goods. And also with the change of time some people filed the cases in the court instead of their traditional council. That is an indication of the losing respect to the traditional council.
- ✧ There are changes taking place in the selection of spouse from outside ethnic groups. Among the Changpas of Kargyam for most of the marriage alliances, they prefer to look for mates within the village but, if they fail to find from the village then they look for Chushul village. Earlier, they belonged to same *Goba* (village head). But now there are some members of Kargyam who left to Leh town for seeking unskilled work as wage laborers; they came across other community members in the work places such as Nepalese. So they married with Nepalese and there is no such seriousness among the community members since the Nepalese are *Sharpa* and belong to same religious community. But there is not any single case of marrying of people of Kargyam with other religious group members.

Notes

- ⁷Mai Mai Chotak, personal communication, Kherapulu, July 2013.

The importance of such a study could not be overstated as Changpas of Kargyam represent a unique form of tribal community and thousands of human beings have ordered their lives according to it for over a thousand of years. The institution of marriage is changing in fast pace in the age of modernization and other internal as well as external factors. Time is of the essence of the matter and serious study should be conducted to find out the various factors as well as to find out different ways to preserve this unique traditional practices of marriage among the Changpa Tribe of Ladakh.

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