

**Polyandry and Customary Rights of Landownership in the Western Himalaya**

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It is remarkable, that a people so degraded in morals, and many of whose customs are of so revolting in nature, should in other respects evince a much higher advancement in civilization, than we discover among other nations, whose manners are more engaging, and whose moral character ranks infinitely higher. Their persons are better clad, and more decent; their approach more polite and unembarrassed; and their address is better than that of most of the inhabitants of the remote highlands of Scotland...and their homes, in point of construction, comfort and internal cleanliness, are beyond comparison superior to Scottish highland dwellings.

James Baillie Fraser, 1815<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction**

For much of human history, there probably never existed exclusive rights over land as we know and understand them today in a market-oriented world. Though more explicit claims to property perhaps appeared comparatively early in the spheres of trade, commerce and within urban centres, these may not have been entirely individual-centred. This was probably even more so in areas of peasant production where money did not mediate social relationships and where the individual had not yet acquired a status independent of his family and community.

In rural South Asia, too, individually owned and controlled landed property may not have become the norm until the unrelenting expansion of colonialism and capitalism gradually overtook simpler, tradition-based societies. Pre-capitalist ideas of property were rooted in social relations. They were not bestowed in entirety upon any single person, institution or collectivity.<sup>2</sup> Neither the individual, nor the community could, therefore, be justifiably seen as the undisputed 'owner' of the land and property upon which economic production was based. Unfortunately, this fact escaped colonial administrators who attempted to identify a legal owner—individual or community—upon whom the absolute right could then be conferred. In doing so they either destroyed, or distorted, the network of mutually recognised claims and relationships that, in a sense, constituted pre-capitalist property.

Ownership, in the pre-modern, world was clearly inextricable from social relationships. Family, kinship and the community jointly defined what was to be classified as property. This

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<sup>1</sup> James Baillie Fraser, *The Himala Mountains*, First published, 1820; rpt., Neeraj Publishing House, Delhi, 1982, p. 208.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief, but interesting, survey on the subject see C.M. Hann, 'From Production to Property: Decollectivization and the Family-Land Relationship in Contemporary Hungary', *MAN*, Vol. 28, No. 2, June 1993, pp. 299-320.

definition was not an act but a process. It materialized from the actual practice of how their worldly possessions came to be used, preserved and transmitted to each succeeding generation. In so far as the individual was concerned, his significance was derived from his being a *member* of a certain social group. Nisbet had suggested that in medieval society, the position of the ‘autonomous individual’ was rather indistinct.<sup>3</sup> Emphasizing the pre-eminence of the ‘small social group’ he argued that:

‘The centrality of the community was much more than a philosophical principle however. Whether we are dealing with the family, the village, or the gild, we are in the presence of systems of authority and allegiance which were widely held to precede the individual in both origin and right...’<sup>4</sup>

If that were the case (and it appears to be so) then property—particularly landed property—would also, in varying degrees, be associated with the different social groups to which the individual belonged. It is to the group, rather than to the individual, that a study of pre-capitalist landownership must necessarily resort. For it was through group unity that the social survival of the individual was ensured.

One such group was the polyandrous family. Though uncommon in much of the world, polyandry has been widely practiced in parts of the Himalayan region. Himachal Pradesh, an Indian province situated in the western Himalaya, had several areas where polyandry was a familiar custom until fairly recent times. These included large parts of the districts of Sirmur, Shimla, Kinnaur, Kulu and Lahaul. In most such areas however, dissimilar forms of family organization were noticeable. Polyandry was one of the arrangements frequently followed; it was not a compulsory social prescription. We explore below how the question of landownership was perceived in such areas by the polyandrous family and the community that supported it. Needless, to say the structure of the family and the nature of rights and obligations assigned to each of its members (including women) would have a bearing on the problem. Customs pertaining to the partition and inheritance of land would be crucial factors for consideration. Also pertinent would be the question: Which classes of society found polyandry a desirable practice?

### **Describing Polyandry**

Families and households were invariably placed in the context of community. The community, in turn, nurtured explanatory legends of origin, settlement and hierarchy that broadly constituted its ideas about identity.<sup>5</sup> These legends also sustained numerous other institutions and customs that

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<sup>3</sup> Robert A. Nisbet, *Community and Power*, Galaxy Book, New York, 1962, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy E. Levine, *Dynamics of Polyandry. Kinship, Domesticity, and Population on the Tibetan Border*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988. p. 21. This work is an in-depth study of a polyandrous Nyinba village of the Nepal Himalaya. Even in the villages of Himachal Pradesh, origin myths and legends thrive in

were crucial to its functioning and helped the community to negotiate with a larger history and geography.

A detailed description of the mental world of the local communities in the western Himalaya lies beyond our present concern. What remains relevant, nevertheless, are the means by which households and families were linked to the community. Lineage was, perhaps, the primary social connection between families. It was also a rudimentary form of political association.<sup>6</sup> Wherever a village community consisted of a single dominant lineage, there was an explicit overlap of authority, and decision-making became simpler.<sup>7</sup> But such was not always the case. Most villages included more than one lineage and each of these occupied mutually acknowledged physical and political space of its own. It has been pointed out in the context of Jaunsar-Bawar (an area adjoining Himachal) that there existed a broad lineage-wise division of area within the village—where the lineage (*aal*) and sub-lineage (*bhera*) occupied distinguishable spaces.<sup>8</sup> The morphology of villages reflected these divisions. In Kinnaur, the *khel* and the *khandan* would be comparable expressions for the same.<sup>9</sup> Most villages in our area of study are similarly dominated by one or the other sub-caste or clan.

More importantly, however, the pivotal units around which the economy and social organization revolved were the households and the family. Scholars have adopted divergent positions regarding what constitutes a family,<sup>10</sup> and even the household in India had to be repeatedly redefined during the colonial period.<sup>11</sup> Given the importance attached to lineage and the powerful bonds of kinship manifest in pre-capitalist societies, it is not surprising that British administrators adopted a broad definition that often included not only the ‘joint’ family but also the larger kinship group.

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the folklore and are too numerous to be recounted here. For example see, H.A. Rose, *A Glossary of Tribes and Castes of Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province*, First published in 1883; rpt., Panjab Languages Department, Patiala, 1970, 3 Volumes. See vol. I.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248. The Nyinba village community also seems to have regulated the number of households that the village should sustain.

<sup>8</sup> D. N. Majumdar, *Himalayan Polyandry. Structure, Functioning and Culture Change. A Field Study of Jaunsar-Bawar*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1962.

<sup>9</sup> M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar, ‘Polyandry in a High Himalayan Society: Persistence and Change’, in M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar (eds.), *Polyandry in India*, Gian Publishing House, Delhi, 1987. pp. 64-5.

<sup>10</sup> The two viewpoints that have dominated thinking on the family have been termed by Claude Levi-Strauss as the ‘verticals’ and the ‘horizontalts’. Claude Levi-Strauss, ‘Introduction’, in A. Burguiere, C. Klapisch-Zuber, M. Segalan and F. Zonabend (eds.), *A History of the Family. Vol. I: Distant Worlds, Ancient Worlds*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 1-7. The first viewpoint emphasizes descent and continuity, while the second stresses the biological foundations of a basic family consisting of man, woman and their children.

<sup>11</sup> Malavika Kasturi, *Embattled Identities. Rajput Lineages and the Colonial State in 19<sup>th</sup> Century North India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 99-100.

Much, however, would depend on the socio-economic situation in which the households and families were placed. Agro-pastoralists may often—though not invariably—choose to organise households in a manner quite different from a society dependent almost entirely on agricultural production.<sup>12</sup> The agro-pastoral, trading Nyinba, who are predominantly polyandrous, and live near the Nepal-Tibet border, adopted a system derived from Tibet. At the top of the social hierarchy was the ‘corporate landholding household known as *trongba*. To the *trongba* was attached a dependent ‘small household’ of landless freed slaves. Associated permanently with the *trongba* could be an ‘adjunct household’ that sustained divorced women.<sup>13</sup> To quote Nancy Levine:

‘Nyinba households are made up of families or, as anthropologists have it, groups concerned with reproduction and socialization of children, where kinship is the criterion for membership. Fully developed *trongba* comprise extended families, overlapping sets of consanguineally related married brothers, their wives, and offspring. Nyinba differentiate these families as *paral*.’<sup>14</sup>

It is important to note that each generation of brothers almost always had one common wife, and it was very rarely that a second wife was brought into the family.

Very similar to the Nyinba system were the customs of the Kinnauras of Himachal. The comments of Gerard, who travelled through Kinnaur in 1817, are disappointingly brief. He simply notes that ‘polyandry or a plurality of husbands prevails’.<sup>15</sup> It was much later, in the 1880s, that another traveller—Andrew Wilson—provided a slightly clearer description. He observed that:

‘Instances of three and five husbands are quite common; but without having gone rigidly into the matter, I should say that the most instances of polyandry were those of two husbands, and that not because there was any objection to five or six, but simply because no greater number of brothers was usually to be found in a family, as might have been

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<sup>12</sup> Jacob Black-Michaud, *Sheep and Land. The economies of power in a tribal society*, Cambridge University Press and Editions de la Maison des Sciences de L’Homme, Cambridge, 1986, p. 57. Among the agro-pastoral Luri tribesmen of western Iran, the head of a patrilineal extended family would aspire to have in his family ‘several able-bodied sons or unmarried brothers to assist him’. In Himachal, as we shall see, the agro-pastoralists of Kinnaur opted for a polyandrous family with a jointly organized system of production. The Gaddi herders, on the other hand, seem to have preferred partition into smaller, nuclear families even though they often worked collaboratively. See Vasant K. Saberwal, *Pastoral Politics. Shepherds, Bureaucrats and Conservation in the Western Himalaya*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy E. Levine, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126. Lineages and households are seen as more important than the family because they are more permanent and represent the family in external relationships.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Gerard, *Account of Koonawar in the Himalaya*, George Lloyd (ed.), Indus Publishing Co., New Delhi, 1993. First published, 1841. See pp. 2-3.

expected from such a system, and as also one of the great ends which that the system is designed to effect.’<sup>16</sup>

Even in Lahaul, it appears that polyandry was of a similar nature, though monogamous marriages were also fairly common.<sup>17</sup> In a modification made to this practice in the adjacent Chamba-Lahaul part of the princely State of Chamba, the number of fraternal husbands was restricted to two.<sup>18</sup>

In the lower Himalaya, the custom was rather different. D. N. Majumdar’s very detailed study brings this point out quite clearly.<sup>19</sup> His description of the joint family in Jaunsar-Bawar was at variance with that of the Nyinba mentioned above. But it is equally descriptive of another kind of polyandrous system found in Himachal. The polyandrous custom followed in parts of Sirmur, Shimla and Kulu was similar to Majumdar’s description of the Jaunsari joint family system below:

‘All brothers marry together, and have one or more wives in common, instead of having separate wives. In fact, the Jaunsari family system is not only polyandrous but a combination of paternal polyandry and polygyny. All men of each generation who are brothers marry together with one or, *as is usually the case*, more than one wife [emphasis mine].’

‘In principle and in practice, all the brothers form an inseparable group as ‘fraternal husbands’ in the name of the eldest brother. The wives, on the other hand, join the union individually, one after another, in the same way as is usually found in the polygynous system, except that the single husband is substituted by the polyandrous group of husbands.’<sup>20</sup>

It may, however, be mentioned that in this system the eldest brother usually occupied a position of greater importance than all the others. Because it differed from the simpler polyandrous system—where there was only one common wife—the lower Himalayan kind of family organization has been more often categorized as polygynandrous.

The system of polyandry was, therefore, far more complex than might have been earlier imagined. In fact, J. B. Lyall, the British official who prepared the revenue settlement report for Kangra District in 1872 was inclined to regard the latter kind of polyandry as ‘a mere custom of community of wives among brothers’.<sup>21</sup> A closer examination of polygynandry seems to suggest

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew Wilson, *The Abode of Snow. Observations on a tour from Chinese Tibet to the Indian Caucasus, through the upper valleys of the Himalaya*, G. P. Putnam’s Sons, London, 1886. Reprint Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu, 1979. pp. 187-8.

<sup>17</sup> *Kangra District Gazetteer, Part III, Lahul*, Punjab Government, Lahore, 1918. p. 194

<sup>18</sup> *Chamba State Gazetteer, 1904*, Punjab Government, Lahore, 1910. p. 161.

<sup>19</sup> D. N. Majumdar, *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>21</sup> J. B. Lyall, *Kangra Settlement Report, 1872*. (Published jointly with the 1850 settlement report of G. C. Barnes in 1889) p. 99. He further clarifies, ‘In one house you may find three brothers with one wife, in the

that there was some truth in Lyall's observation. For instance, it might be difficult to regard the polygynandrous family as a distinct 'family type'. It has been argued that in Jaunsar-Bawar 'due to frequency of divorce and of taking multiple wives', there was a likelihood that 'every monogamous family may change to one or other of the forms....and even a polyandrous and polygynous family may be reduced to monogamous unions.'<sup>22</sup> This point was again emphasised by Gerald Berreman, who writes that, 'an individual may experience in his or her life a single spouse, a multiplicity of spouses, a co-spouse or a multiplicity of co-spouses'.<sup>23</sup> Evidently then, polyandry, polygyny, polygynandry and even monogamy in Jaunsar-Bawar were probably merely variations of a single form.<sup>24</sup> The same would be true of some parts of Sirmur, Kulu and Shimla areas where marriage and family systems were similar.

How is one then to view the different kinds of polyandrous practices found in Himachal? It appears that limited economic resources were a primary constraint on the number of wives that could be taken by fraternal husbands in Sirmur, Shimla and Kulu.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the existence of bride-price in these areas often meant that poorer families could afford only one wife. For the more prosperous ones, on the other hand, it was a matter of prestige to have the largest affordable number of wives. This, however, was somewhat different from the polyandrous practices of Kinnaur and Lahaul which were largely akin to those of Tibet and the Nepal Himalaya. Unlike the lower Himalayan polygynandrous system, the custom in Kinnaur and Lahaul appears to be a more explicit attempt to conserve family wealth. There was a preference for having only one wife, thereby limiting the number of inheritors.<sup>26</sup> According to Goldstein, 'the two polyandrous societies have different deep structures with the same surface structure, whereas the Tibetan and the non-polyandrous wealth conserving societies have different surface structures with the same deep structure.'<sup>27</sup>

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next three brothers with four wives, all alike in common; in the next there may be an only son with three wives to himself.'

<sup>22</sup> D. N. Majumdar, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>23</sup> Gerald Berreman, 'Himalayan Polyandry and the Domestic Cycle', in M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar (eds.), *Polyandry in India*, p. 194.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>25</sup> Y. S. Parmar, *Polyandry in the Himalaya*; D. N. Majumdar, *op. cit.*; Ramesh Chandra, 'Polyandry in the North-Western Himalaya: Some Changing Trends', in M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar (eds.), *Polyandry in India*.

<sup>26</sup> The comparison of these phenomena has been made by Melvyn C. Goldstein. 'Pahari and Tibetan Polyandry Revisited', in M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar (eds.) *Polyandry in India*, p. 212. The rule of having only one common wife was, however, not absolutely rigid. Brothers who were much younger than the eldest, too, could take an additional common wife if they so wished. Prince Peter, *A Study of Polyandry*, Mouton & Co., The Hague, 1963, p. 313. It is possible, however, that brothers falling within a similar age group would not find it necessary to do so.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

But is this true? Despite the apparent similarities between the two systems, were they entirely divergent in their objectives as Goldstein has suggested? Is wealth conservation not an important consideration in a polygynandrous system? Conversely—was Tibetan polyandry entirely inspired by wealth conservation?

### **Explaining Polyandry**

It is not necessary that similar institutions should arise from the same causes or serve identical purposes. Yet it may be worthwhile to examine whether institutional similarity, in this particular case, extends beyond outward appearances. No single factor can credibly explain the emergence of polyandry in a society—notwithstanding its own explanations in this regard. Apart from their claims to following a time honoured social custom, the concerned societies are often able to successfully point to several of its appreciable benefits.<sup>28</sup> Cultural factors, though subtle and significant, may not tell the entire story.

Nor, for that matter, can we regard polyandry simply as a social institution for population control, as did Andrew Wilson, who wondered, ‘what desperate means are had recourse to in order to get rid of the pressures caused by the acknowledged law of population.’<sup>29</sup> Gender imbalance in the population has been presented by Parmar, as one of the reasons for the custom, and he has provided census statistics to emphasize his point.<sup>30</sup> While the gender imbalance certainly existed in some parts of Sirmur and Shimla district, its causes need first to be explained. Was it a cause or a consequence of polyandry? Moreover, this does not explain, the practice of polyandry in places like Chini *tehsil* in Kinnaur where (in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) the number of females exceeded males.<sup>31</sup>

High bride-price is sometimes seen as a cause of polyandry even though it does not appear to be a good enough explanation. James Fraser, who passed through the eastern parts of Himachal in 1815 observed:

It is usual all over the country, for the future husband to purchase his wife from her parents, and the sum paid varies of course with the rank of the purchaser. The customary

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<sup>28</sup> Nancy E. Levine, *Op. cit.*, p. 9. The Nyinba explain polyandry in terms of social custom. In Himachal, too, this customary justification is primarily based on the example of the Pandava brothers and their common wife Draupadi who are characters of the epic *Mahabharata*. Rationalization by reference to associated benefits is made subsequently and almost as an afterthought.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Wilson, *The Abode of Snow*, p. 184. The population control argument has persisted even in later works. See Ramesh Chandra, ‘Sex Roles Arrangement to Achieve Economic Security in North Western Himalaya’, in Christopher von Furer Haimendorf (ed.) *Asian Highland Societies: An Anthropological Perspective*, New Delhi, 1981, p. 210.

<sup>30</sup> Y. S. Parmar, *Polyandry in the Himalayas*. Peculiarly, these were also the areas where more than one wife could be, and was, kept by polyandrous brothers. Parmar also, however, gives the need for avoiding partition of scarce land as another cause for polyandry. See p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> Chatur Bhuj, ‘Chini Tehsil Settlement Report, 1928’ (Typescript), para. 25, 26. Statistics for Chini *tehsil* are referred to here.

charge to a common peasant or zamindar is from ten to twenty rupees. The difficulty of raising this sum and the alleged expense of maintaining women, may in part account for, if it cannot excuse, a most disgusting usage, which is universal over the country'.<sup>32</sup>

Fraser himself seems to have admitted however, that bride-price alone could not explain the adoption of polyandry. Kapadia has rightly pointed out that polyandry was customary in certain societies even when the bride-price was very low, while it may never have been adopted by societies that paid a high bride-price.<sup>33</sup>

As a method of socio-economic organization, the polyandrous family certainly offered some advantages to its members. The central point emphasized by scholars has been the systematic division of labour within the households, in a manner that enabled them to fully exploit the diversity of the physical environment.<sup>34</sup> Unsettled and pastoral societies were seen as more likely to adopt polyandry because it ensured the presence of at least one husband at home, while the others were engaged in periodic trading or herding activities elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> This division of labour allowed the household a considerable degree of economic diversification. In his revenue settlement report, prepared for Rohru *tehsil* (formerly part of Bushahr State that also included Kinnaur) in 1914, Emerson provides a very detailed and multi-causal explanation. He ruled out gender imbalance and scarcity of land as important factors, but stressed two other points. The first was the compulsion of a diversified economy already mentioned above. The second point emphasized the demands for labour imposed by the State on the peasant household. He argued that:

‘The old system, by which the state demanded the whole-time services of one man from every household for at least six months in the year, necessitated the encouragement of large joint families. A veto was therefore placed on the partition of all property and the temptation to break this prohibition was small, as division entailed the provision to the State of two men instead of one.’<sup>36</sup>

In the context of Mandi, too, it was felt that the requirements of *begar* (forced labour) were responsible for encouraging polyandry in its Saraj area.<sup>37</sup> A reduction in the annual demand for *begar* by the Bushahr State from six months to one, and the withdrawal of the State ban on the

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<sup>32</sup> James Baillie Fraser, *The Himala Mountains*, p. 206.

<sup>33</sup> K. M. Kapadia, *Marriage and Family in India*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1959, p. 71.

<sup>34</sup> M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar ‘Polyandry in a High Himalayan Society: Persistence and Change’, in M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar (eds.) *Polyandry in India*, p. 83; D. N. Majumdar, *op. cit.*, p. 75, ‘... the number of wives can be adjusted to their economic means and personal needs’. Nancy E. Levine, *op. cit.*, pp. 132, 159.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Wilson, *The Abode of Snow*, p. 192.

<sup>36</sup> H. W. Emerson, *Rohru Tahsil Settlement Report*, 1914, para. 36.

<sup>37</sup> *Mandi State Gazetteer*, Punjab Government, Lahore, 1920, p. 67.

partition of family landholdings, was seen by Emerson as being responsible for the gradual modification of polyandry.<sup>38</sup> There seems to have been a general feeling that ‘the abolition of *begar* with the stimulus given to partition by the introduction of a regular revenue system will result in its [polyandry’s] disappearance within a few years.’<sup>39</sup>

Irrespective of their other differences, therefore, the efficient utilization of family labour was a crucial consideration common to polyandrous households. The economic benefits thus obtained, afforded to these households a reasonable standard of living. This was noticed by W. Murray, in 1824, when he wrote that in Kinnaur the people seemed to be ‘in good circumstances for their class. They have enough of the necessaries of life and not a few of the comforts.’<sup>40</sup> These words unmistakably reiterate the observations of J. B. Fraser that have been quoted at the onset. In the true polyandrous areas, as we have noticed, the limited family labour was not all used in agricultural activity, but was extended to herding and trading. Moreover, extensive landholdings in the higher Himalaya were not only difficult to create; they might also have been undesirable and uneconomic.<sup>41</sup> Polygynandry of the lower Himalaya, on the other hand, had a more flexible approach to labour management. It has, in fact, been seen by some scholars as a flexible institution that was ‘a means of managing the ratio of workers and consumers to resources’.<sup>42</sup> Be that as it may, polyandrous and polygynandrous households were both viable socio-economic units that not only survived, but thrived, through centuries. They also successfully passed on their household wealth and claim to resources to succeeding generations. Customary norms were evolved and applied to ensure a smooth transference.

### **Inheritance and Partition of Family Property**

Himachal, like much of South Asia, had a dominant oral—not literary—tradition. Virtually no documentary sources of pre-colonial times are available to us about local tribal and peasant customs. These customs survived as living practices till they came to be recorded by the British in revenue related documents known as *Riwaj-i-Am* (Common Tradition) or *Wajib-ul-Arz*.

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<sup>38</sup> H. W. Emerson, *op. cit.* He says that as a result there was a ‘widespread division of families, although, even in this case, the separation is into groups and not units’.

<sup>39</sup> *Mandi State Gazetteer*, p. 100.

<sup>40</sup> Lieutenant W. Murray, Deputy Superintendent Hill States to C. Elliot, Agent to the Governor-General, Western Province, dated 6 July 1824, in C. P. Kennedy, *Report on the Protected States*.

<sup>41</sup> Nancy E. Levine, *Dynamics of Polyandry*, p. 252. Most Nyinba household could not meet their labour needs if the landholding increased beyond a point. They believed that productivity declined if the holding got too large.

<sup>42</sup> Melvyn C. Goldstein, ‘Pahari and Tibetan Polyandry Revisited’, in M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar (eds.) *Polyandry in India*, p. 211.

It is now well recognized, however, that the official recording of indigenous codes and social customs by colonial administrators altered, to some extent, their character and content.<sup>43</sup> The British were, certainly, familiar with the many complications attached to this task. Among such difficulties, Lyall noted, was the tendency of rival caste groups and clans, ‘to shirk the avowal of a custom which it knows is regarded with ridicule or disdain by others of higher social standing’.<sup>44</sup> However, these inevitable problems of documenting oral tradition are not entirely overcome, either by the timing of their recording, or by the diligence of the person engaged in it. Yet the absence of written documents makes it necessary for us to use recorded traditions and customary practices, albeit with appropriate discretion.

To begin with it appears that in a polyandrous family, the wife/ wives and children belonged to the brothers jointly. It has been argued that though the right of the sons over family land was established at birth, it remained confined to a claim to maintenance during the lifetime of their father/ fathers.<sup>45</sup> It was only after the death of all the brothers—who were jointly the fathers of all the children—that the issue of inheritance effectively arose. If, thereafter, the family chose to stay together, the sons would jointly claim the inheritance of their fathers. They could, and usually did, themselves continue in a polyandrous/ polygynandrous relationship.<sup>46</sup>

Till the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Sirmur State, even sons by a woman not formally married into the family could rightly inherit their fathers’ property.<sup>47</sup> This claim, it appears, was increasingly being disputed. It was, perhaps, in keeping with this trend that by the middle of the last century, the position of illegitimate sons had become considerably weaker even in Kulu. They could now only inherit the property either with the permission of the legitimate sons or in their absence.<sup>48</sup>

A clearer idea of ownership rights can be obtained from the proprietary claims that arose subsequent to the partition of a family’s landholding. This usually happened when one of the brothers decided to move out of the polyandrous relationship or family and claim his share of the patrimony. It is likely that such a decision would be encouraged by the availability of additional land and resources ‘from a household’s own estate, from re-inheritance of a vacant estate, or from

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<sup>43</sup> Neeladri Bhattacharya, ‘Remaking Custom: The Discourse and Practice of Colonial Codification’, in R. Champakalakshmi and S. Gopal (eds.), *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology. Essays in Honour of Romila Thapar*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996, pp. 20-51.

<sup>44</sup> J. B. Lyall, *Kangra Settlement Report, 1872*, p. 149.

<sup>45</sup> L. D. Joshi, *The Khasa Family Law in the Himalayan Districts of the United Provinces*, Government Press, Allahabad, 1929, pp. 232-33.

<sup>46</sup> *Sirmur State Gazetteer, 1904*, Punjab Government, Lahore, 1907. p. 280.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>48</sup> Bachittar Singh, *Rewaj-i-Am (Kulu, Lahaul, Spiti Settlement, 1945-51)* Reprint, Himachal Academy of Arts, Culture and Language, Shimla, 2003, p. 42.

land newly cleared.<sup>49</sup> In fact, the need for extra resources would probably have been a prerequisite for partition even in non-polyandrous traditional households in other societies. Separation from a joint household was always a risky endeavour, and sometimes economic compulsions resulted in the re-merger of the separating household.<sup>50</sup>

If partition became imperative, the custom in Himachal was that household property was to be shared equally between the sons irrespective of the number of mothers.<sup>51</sup> In adjacent Jaunsar-Bawar, however, the eldest and youngest brothers were customarily entitled to a little extra of the family property than the others.<sup>52</sup> Broadly speaking, nevertheless, the general principle of equality among brothers was sought to be upheld. In so far as the children were concerned, the rules were not very clear. Although in a polyandrous family, the eldest brother was nominally the father of the children, the partitioning of the household would alter the situation. At times the women could be given the right to name the father of the child. But a more accepted method—where the brothers had one common wife—was that the eldest brother was regarded as the father of the first-born son, the second brother as the father of the second son and so on.<sup>53</sup> Needless to say, since such divisions were rare, the practices associated with it were rather fluid and contested. Even the matter of inheritance became somewhat more complicated in case one or two brothers separated from the joint family while the remaining brothers continued to live together with their common wife/ wives. The share of the separating brothers was apparently reduced, because the children in the earlier polyandrous relationship usually continued to live in the original household.<sup>54</sup> After such a partition, sons born to a separating brother had no claim on the estate of the joint household.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the sons born in the joint household could not inherit any share in the estate of their separated step-father.<sup>56</sup> The practice in Jaunsar-Bawar was somewhat different. It seems that after the death of the separating brother, his share of the ancestral property reverted ‘to his children by the common wife; and his offspring by his new

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<sup>49</sup> Nancy E. Levine, *op. cit.*, pp. 240, 269. See also Alan Mitchell, *Report on the Administration of Bashahr, 1914-15*, Shimla, 1915, p. 28, who argued that ‘the influx of money spent on the roads, buildings and exploitation’ resulted in increased prosperity and hence the ‘splitting up of holdings’.

<sup>50</sup> Nancy Tapper, *Bartered Brides: Politics, gender and marriage in an Afghan tribal society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 130.

<sup>51</sup> J. B. Lyall, *Kangra District Settlement Report, 1872*, p. 99; *Kangra District Gazetteer, Part III, Lahul*, 1917, p. 194.

<sup>52</sup> L. D. Joshi, *op. cit.*, pp. 280, 281-2; D. N. Majumdar, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>53</sup> *Kangra District Gazetteer, Part II, Kulu*, 1917, pp. 51-2.

<sup>54</sup> L. D. Joshi, *op. cit.*, p. 233. Joshi quotes the *Dastur-ul Amal*, para 12, cl (i) of Dehradun district. ‘If a younger brother out of four brothers separates, he cannot take away the wife or children, “but the children are entitled to equal shares from the four brothers which are paid to the elder” with whom they live.’

<sup>55</sup> J. B. Lyall, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

<sup>56</sup> Bachittar Singh, *Rewaj-i-Am*, p. 83.

monogamous wife inherit only what he is able to earn or acquire after is separation from the family fold'.<sup>57</sup>

Polyandrous families in the Himalaya were clearly patriarchal and the right to inherit property, in a complete sense, was restricted to sons. This did not, however, eliminate certain well recognised claims of the women of the family. To begin with, every woman in the household had a right to maintenance till death.<sup>58</sup> But the strongest of these rights was probably the life-interest that a widow had in the estate of her husband/ husbands, in case there were no sons.<sup>59</sup> This was, of course, a right enjoyed by widows equally in non-polyandrous households. In the case of a partitioned polyandrous family, it appears that an issueless widow would be entitled to a life-interest only in the share of the husband who died last.<sup>60</sup> Presumably then, the remaining shares (of her husband's brothers) would become re-attached to the estate of the other brothers of her husband or their sons. The right of the widow was derived from the assumption that the widow, in such instances, represented her husband.<sup>61</sup> As long as she continued to reside on the inherited property, her life-interest persisted even if she took a partner to live with her who would assist in its management.<sup>62</sup> This right, however, ceased to operate if the widow either formally married her partner or left the house of her head husband to live permanently elsewhere. Normally no right to alienate the property was given to widows.<sup>63</sup>

As a norm, unmarried daughters had a right to residence in their father's home and also to maintenance from their father, brother or nephew—whoever was the head of the household at that point of time.<sup>64</sup> But there was a general consensus that daughters and their sons could not, under normal circumstances, inherit the estate of their father.<sup>65</sup> Only exceptional circumstances could justify a daughter taking over the land and property of her father. In the absence of sons, for instance, it was possible for a daughter to inherit the estate. This, however, was only possible if she brought her husband to live with her while the father was still alive.<sup>66</sup> If, on the other hand,

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<sup>57</sup> Sarva Daman Singh, *Polyandry in Ancient India*, Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi, First published, 1978; rpt. 1988, p. 171.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90

<sup>59</sup> J. B. Lyall. *Kangra Settlement Report*, p. 72; *Mandi State Gazetteer*, 1920, pp. 100, 185.

<sup>60</sup> Bachittar Singh, *Rewaj-i-Am*, pp. 82-3.

<sup>61</sup> L. D. Joshi, *op. cit.*, p. 283. Joshi argues that this was a 19<sup>th</sup> century development brought about by the influence of British ideas regarding property and succession. This may not, however, be entirely correct.

<sup>62</sup> J. B. Lyall, *op. cit.*, p. 72; *Kangra District Gazetteer, Part II, Kulu*, 1917, p. 51; *Mandi State Gazetteer*, 1920, pp. 100, 185.

<sup>63</sup> Bachittar Singh, *Rewaj-i-Am*, p. 50.

<sup>64</sup> *Kangra District Gazetteer, Part IV, Spiti*, 1917 p. 265; T. K. Ghosh, 'Persistence of Lahaul Polyandry and Decline', in M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar, (eds.) *Polyandry in India*, pp. 55-6.

<sup>65</sup> L. D. Joshi, *op. cit.*, p. 236. This was the general rule amongst Khasas throughout the Himalayan belt.

<sup>66</sup> J. B. Lyall, *op. cit.*, p. 112. This was reasserted by the *Kangra District Gazetteer, Part III, Lahul*, 1917, p. 194.

she had married earlier and left home to live with her husband, she would be passed over by collateral relatives in the matter of inheritance. This position appears to have changed by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, for it is recorded in the customary rules of Lahaul and Spiti (1945-51) that a male proprietor could gift his ancestral property to his daughter or sister and their sons but only in the absence of male lineal descendents.<sup>67</sup> Unmarried daughters, too, could only have a life-interest in the estate with no right to alienate it.

The right to alienate property in Western Himalayan societies was, in fact, a severally restricted—almost non-existent—one. Even in non-polyandrous families the father did not have the right to alienate land thereby depriving his sons of their inheritance. At the same time, his sons could not insist on a partition while he was alive.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, the sons could not be disinherited or given unequal shares of the ancestral property by a disgruntled father.<sup>69</sup> So inviolable was the collective interest of the family in land that amongst the Khasas in Tehri State, it appears, the sale of land was either not permissible or extremely difficult. Nor could it be mortgaged or confiscated ‘for the debts of the father’.<sup>70</sup> What made the alienation particularly difficult was the fact that there existed virtually no market for land. In Lahaul, for example, Lyall was aware of only one instance of land sale—to Moravian missionaries—that had taken place.<sup>71</sup>

### **Role of State, Community and Household in Land Control**

It is now widely accepted by scholars that absolute proprietary rights over land in pre-colonial times was, by and large, unknown. ‘Ownership’ was at best understood through a hierarchy of rights and obligations that different social sections had primarily on cultivated land.<sup>72</sup> As already mentioned, the British complicated matters by assigning complete ownership to whichever class of claimants they found most convenient in an area. However, by the time British influence was extended to present-day Himachal, the colonial administration had acquired a more nuanced understanding of the issues at hand. Consequently, a graded proprietorship was created and shared between the raja or ruler of the State (*malik-i-ala* or superior proprietor) and the peasant cultivator (*malik-i-adna* or smaller/inferior proprietor).<sup>73</sup> The peasant households that we have discussed above belonged to the second category of ‘inferior proprietors’. Their ownership rights were

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<sup>67</sup> Bachittar Singh, *Rewaj-i-Am*, p. 68.

<sup>68</sup> L. D. Joshi, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

<sup>69</sup> Bachittar Singh, *Rewaj-i-Am*, p. 44.

<sup>70</sup> L. D. Joshi, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

<sup>71</sup> J. B. Lyall, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>72</sup> The amount of work on this subject is too large to be referred here. As a good example the monumental work of Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707*, Asia Publishing House, 1963.

<sup>73</sup> Chetan Singh, *Natural Premises: Ecology and Peasant Life in the Western Himalaya, 1800-1950*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1998, pp. 57-8.

constrained in as much as the raja (ruler) enjoyed the more influential position of being a 'superior proprietor'. This was, perhaps, recognition of the fact that complete ownership of land by an individual was not yet a common or fully developed phenomenon.

Not surprisingly, the State had a legitimate interest in controlling how, and to what extent, peasant families could exercise ownership over the land they cultivated. In terms of its origin, it has been suggested, the State was not 'the direct outgrowth of family, tribe or local community' but emerged in opposition to them.<sup>74</sup> It was the product of military mobilization and an establishment of claim over land through conquest. L. D. Joshi has argued that wherever the raja was unable to encroach upon the sphere of local authority, the latter retained control over the tenure under which constituent different families/ households possessed land. If a proprietor wished to sell a part of his land, he needed the permission of the *siana* or village/ community headman to do so.<sup>75</sup> Examples of this were the Khaikari villages of the present-day hill province of Uttaranchal adjoining Himachal. At least till the first two or three decades of the last century, if a family became extinct in such villages, its land lapsed to the Khaikari community and not to the collaterals who may wish to claim it.<sup>76</sup> Within communities, Joshi suggested, the landholding units were families and not individuals. For the family the landholding was a kind of joint trust that protected the interest of all its members, especially sons.<sup>77</sup>

In fact, 'the inseparableness of the family lands from the family' was an essential characteristic of Khasa customary law.<sup>78</sup> If a proprietor cultivator of a village abandoned his land, his brothers or nephews were expected to cultivate it. In case no relatives were available, the *siana* (headman) could hand over the land to other proprietors of the village for cultivation. Failing this, a person from outside could be invited. Under no circumstances, would it be handed over to a low caste person, even if it entailed keeping the land fallow and sharing the revenue obligation amongst the upper caste village proprietors.<sup>79</sup>

Perhaps we need to recognize that in a very basic sense, household decisions were not simply economic in nature—they were also political.<sup>80</sup> Caste, community and kinship were vibrant decision-making institutions, closely networked into the structural dynamics of pre-colonial society and State, They remained so even during the colonial period, albeit in an altered

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<sup>74</sup> Robert A. Nisbet, *Community and Power*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>75</sup> R. N. Saksena, *Social Economy of a Polyandrous People*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, First published 1954; rpt, 1962, p. 109.

<sup>76</sup> L. D. Joshi, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-6, 232.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* p. 235.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* p. 208.

<sup>79</sup> R. N. Saksena, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>80</sup> Mary S. Hartman, *The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 245. She rightly argues that 'it makes little sense to keep interpreting elite behaviour as political and active and peasant behaviour as economic and passive'.

manner.<sup>81</sup> The relationship between peasant households and the State has always been particularly close; more so because land revenue was the primary source of income for the latter. Peasants were also mobilized for military duty or for providing a host of other services required by the rulers and their administrative apparatus. What has been noted in the gazetteer about Kulu State is illustrative of the peasant-State relationship and applies equally to the other petty principalities that once flourished across this Western Himalayan region.

Households in Kulu held land on condition of service to the State. Peasants belonging to the Kanet caste were given land technically in lieu of military service, while the low caste Dagens were required to perform menial tasks. The standard unit of one holding of the Kanets—called *jeola*—was divided into two halves.<sup>82</sup> One half (*bartojeola*) was held rent free if service was provided to the State by one male member of the household. The other (*hansilijeola*) was assessed for taxation, and revenue had to be paid for it to the raja. If a household could provide two men for service, the entire holding would be converted into a *bartojeola* (i.e. rent free). There was, apparently, no limit to the number of rent-paying *hansili* holdings that a family could acquire. Labour requirements of mountain farming were, however, so great that for a family to possess even two such holdings was rare. The smaller Dagi holding, called *cheti*, measuring roughly one-half to one-fourth of the Kanet held *jeola*, was held entirely rent free on condition of service.<sup>83</sup>

With Kanet peasants holding the largest part of the cultivated land,<sup>84</sup> the onus of providing unpaid labour to the State also fell largely upon them. The household was the primary unit recognized by the State for this purpose. One might, therefore, argue that the peasants made a deliberate choice to retain joint families within a single household. By doing so, they could meet the State's compulsory demand for the services of one man per household, while freeing other members of the family to engage in a labour intensive agro-pastoral and/ or trading household economy. Moreover, because socio-political stability depended upon the economic viability of households that provided service and revenue, the State took care to regulate their functioning. This was clearly the case in polyandrous Tibet and Ladakh. Polyandry in Ladakh, it seems, 'was found among farmers who cultivated land held directly from government and paid their taxes to it directly'.<sup>85</sup> It was also true of the principality of Bushahr where polyandry was a fairly common practice and where (as we have noticed above) the division of immovable property was not earlier

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<sup>81</sup> Malavika Kasturi, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>82</sup> *Kangra District Gazetteer, Part II, Kulu*, 1917, p. 150. Land was measured by seed required to sow a particular area—a *bhar*. The *jeola* consisted of 12 *bhars*.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156. Village menial held only 15 to 20 per cent of the total cultivated area around 1917.

<sup>85</sup> John H. Crook, 'Polyandry in Ladakh', in M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar (eds.), *Polyandry in India*, p. 46. Nancy E. Levine, *Dynamics of Polyandry*, p. 184. She provides information based on Pedro Carrasco, *Land and Polity in Tibet*, Seattle, 1950, where mention is made to stability in Ladakh being achieved by ensuring the indivisibility of inheritance. In Bhutan there was a law prohibiting the combination of households.

permitted.<sup>86</sup> Decline in the State's demand for labour and the grant of permission to partition landholdings is seen by observers as leading to a reduction in the number of polyandrous families.

Whatever the factors contributing to the initial adoption of polyandry, its continuance was evidently linked to the issue of landholding. This becomes apparent when we examine the class/category of households where it was a preferred custom. Nancy Levine categorically states that, 'Polyandry almost certainly was more common among the rich and landed'.<sup>87</sup> Polyandrous households were better placed to retain and control a larger amount of land and economic resources in some areas. This also, probably, gave them a higher social status and enabled them to play a crucial role in the community's economic life and in political relations with the State. In the context of Tibet, Goldstein comments that 'Polyandry is primarily selected not for bread and butter motives—fear of starvation in a difficult environment—but rather primarily for the Tibetan equivalent of oysters, champagne and social esteems'.<sup>88</sup> Polyandry in Ladakh, too, was closely associated with the 'landed farming way of life' and was influenced by the compulsions of paying taxes on land held from the State. On the other hand, social classes having the least land did not formally adopt polyandry.<sup>89</sup> This pattern was equally true for Lahaul where more of the upper caste Rajput landowners were polyandrous than the largely landless menial classes.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, we need to also recognize exceptions. In adjacent Spiti, the practice seems to have been reversed. Here only the eldest brother—who inherited the property—was permitted to marry, while the younger ones became monks. In contrast to Lahaul, there existed in Spiti, an impoverished landless class of minstrel monks who were frequently traders and were sometimes also polyandrous.<sup>91</sup>

The greater social acceptability of the polyandrous system and prestige attached to it is illustrated by the slaves in the Nyinba village of the Nepal Himalaya studied by Nancy Levine. Upon gaining freedom, these slaves gave up their monogamous custom and began marrying polyandrously—like their former masters—as soon as they acquired enough wealth.<sup>92</sup> Nearer our

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<sup>86</sup> This point is also made by R. H. Deuster, *Kanawar*, Himachal Pradesh Academy of Arts, Culture and Language, Shimla, 1996 (First published, 1939) p. 42.

<sup>87</sup> Nancy E. Levine, *Dynamics of Polyandry*, p. 58. Andrew Wilson, *The Abode of Snow*, p. 186 quotes Emerson Tennet who says that, 'polyandry prevails throughout the interior of Ceylon chiefly amongst the wealthier classes...'

<sup>88</sup> Melvyn C. Goldstein, 'Pahari and Tibetan Polyandry Revisited', in M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar (eds.), *Polyandry in India*, p. 205. See also Nancy E. Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

<sup>89</sup> John H. Crook, 'Polyandry in Ladakh', in M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar (eds.), *Polyandry in India*, p. 44.

<sup>90</sup> T. K. Ghosh, 'Persistence of Lahaul Polyandry and Decline' in M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar (eds.), *Polyandry in India*, p. 56. See also Prince Peter, *A Study of Polyandry*, p. 567, who argues that landowners practiced polyandry though the poorer people, too, would sometimes do so in order to 'keep their meager possessions undivided'.

<sup>91</sup> J. B. Lyall, *Kangra Settlement Report*, p. 126; *Kangra District Gazetteer, Part IV, Spiti*, 1917, pp. 266, 272.

<sup>92</sup> Nancy E. Levine, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-4.

area of study, in Jaunsar-Bawar, there was a higher prevalence of polyandry amongst high caste landowners—Khasas and Brahmins—than amongst artisans and landless labourers.<sup>93</sup> It may be recalled that in Jaunsar-Bawar, polygynandry was the practice. Poorer peasants here were unable to afford more than one wife. They might even have been disinclined to preserve a joint-family of brothers because they did not have any viable inheritance in land around which such families were invariably built.<sup>94</sup> In Kinnaur, it has been calculated by Raha and Coomar that as late as the 1960s, 26.38 per cent of all marriages were polyandrous. Amongst the high class Rajputs polyandrous/polygynandrous marriages were as high as 47.82 per cent.<sup>95</sup> There were, nevertheless, many villages in Kinnaur where even the low caste Kolis had polyandrous/polygynandrous households.<sup>96</sup> In the latter case the chances were that they possessed a reasonable amount of agricultural land. The pretence to a higher status that the polyandrous Kanet peasants of Saraj (Kulu) had over the Kanets of Kulu Proper was, perhaps, in keeping with the general respectability polyandry seems to have enjoyed in the region.<sup>97</sup>

Andrew Wilson, in his travel account of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century categorically disagrees with the view earlier expressed by Cunningham in the context of Ladakh that polyandry was a system followed by the 'poorer classes'. On the contrary he supports the contention that it was 'found also frequently in the most opulent families'. This point is perhaps illustrated by his reference to the family of the *mukhia* (headman) of the village of Pooh (Kinnaur) in which six brothers were married to one wife.<sup>98</sup> We can reasonably assume that the headman of Pooh was among the more prosperous members of the village community.

## Conclusion

Social institutions like polyandry may have arisen on account of a complex combination of factors. Such institutions, however, often come to serve a purpose quite unrelated to the initial causes of their origin. The current relevance of a social system cannot, therefore, be read back as the original reason for its emergence. For us, it is easier to understand the purposes for which polyandry came to be used in our area of study, than to trace its origins.

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<sup>93</sup> D. N. Majumdar, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>94</sup> Gerald Berreman, 'Himalayan Polyandry and the Domestic Cycle', in M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar (eds.), *Polyandry in India*, p. 187.

<sup>95</sup> M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar, 'Polyandry in a High Himalayan Society: Persistence and Change', in M. K. Raha and P. C. Coomar (eds.), *Polyandry in India*, pp. 72, 78.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91. The one area in which the poor were inclined towards polyandry was Spiti. Primogeniture was the custom among the landowners of Spiti. J. B. Lyall, *op. cit.*, p. 126; *Kangra District Gazetteer, Part IV, Spiti*, p. 266.

<sup>97</sup> H. A. Rose, *A Glossary of Tribes and Castes of Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province*, First published 1883; rpt, Punjab Languages Department, Patiala, 1970, 3 volumes. See vol. II, p. 458.

<sup>98</sup> Andrew Wilson, *The Abode of Snow*, p. 187.

Irrespective of their considerable variations, both polyandry and polygynandry, appear to have been, in part at least, methods of managing and conserving patrimonial wealth— particularly customary claims on landholdings.<sup>99</sup> This wealth was then passed down to the next succeeding generation in accordance with patriarchal rules of inheritance. While some households may have been polyandrous on account of their poverty, the larger number of such households were relatively prosperous and landowning. Polyandry was clearly something more than a rudimentary survival strategy for mountain areas with limited agricultural land.

Joint polyandrous households of landowners were also micro political units. They exerted considerable influence on matters of importance in the village community and enjoyed greater prestige. Their position was further reinforced by the fact that in a political system based on the extraction of forced labour and services they were better placed to meet their service obligations towards the State, while simultaneously controlling comparatively more agricultural land.

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<sup>99</sup> H. A. Rose, *A Glossary of Tribes and Castes*, vol. III, p. 13. Rose sees polyandry as a means to 'prevent the division of estates'. Here too, the motive may usually have been to enable the family to retain a position of dominance rather than to prevent its decline into abject poverty.