

Evolution Of Polygynous Tradition In The Nyishi Community Of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: Polygyny, a marital system where a man is married to more than one woman, has been a traditional practice among various tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, with the Nyishi tribe being one of its notable practitioners. However, the contemporary discourse on polygyny in the state has shifted, with increasing scrutiny from women activists who question its moral and ethical standing in relation to women's rights. Despite the broader societal advancements that have led to a gradual decline in polygynous marriages across different societies, including within the Nyishi community, the practice continues to exist among certain segments. This study endeavors to delve into the transforming landscape of polygyny in Arunachal Pradesh, with a particular focus on the Nyishi tribe. It seeks to explore the evolving patterns of polygynous marriages and their implications for the social status of women within the tribe. By examining the changing dynamics of this traditional practice, the study aims to understand the complex interface between cultural traditions and a quest of gender equality in a rapidly modernizing society.

Keywords: Continuity and Change, Polygyny, Nyishi, and Arunachal Pradesh

Introduction

Marriage and family are the universal social institutions, and both the institutions are interconnected to each other for there cannot be a family without marriage. As Rajadhyaksha and Bhatnagar said, the marriage that usually took place between two opposite gender is essential in human civilization for survival of humanity.ⁱ The practice of polygyny is one popular type of marriages, which is flourishing since the ancient time that is still found it's relevant in contemporary societies, particularly among the tribal societies around the world. In the past, this marriage was largely considered as an important form of marriage because it allowed the family to spawned bigger offspring on one hand, and accounted blessing for the family as it opened window of accumulating resources on the other.ⁱⁱ However, this system has slowly and steadily impacting the social and psychological health of every woman in modern time. Thus, the Polygyny has recently come under serious debate and scrutiny of the state. According to G. P. Murdock, in his study in the early 1940s, many social communities were involved in polygyny as the most common form wherein man were adorned rights to marry more than one wife.ⁱⁱⁱ Accordingly, the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh follows the polygyny system from the time immemorial and continue practicing until recent time with pride largely among the male group. In the past, this practice was permitted to commensurate under the customary laws primarily to expand the family which in turned was a foundation for stable economic status. Consequently, the system is misused in modern time in the name of tradition and spark to a debate about its sanctity and relevance.

Polygyny Marriage System in Nyishi Tribe

The Nyishi tribe considers as one of the largest ethnic groups in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, and they spread across seven districts viz. Papum Pare, East Kameng, West Kameng, Kra Daadi, Kurung Kumey. The Nyishi tribe also partly found in Lower Subansiri and Upper Subansiri of Arunachal Pradesh, and in Sonitpur and North Lakhimpur districts of Assam. According to the 2011 census, the total population of Nyishi is approximately 300,000.^{iv} The term “Nishi” is composed of two words i.e., “Nyi” meaning “a man” and “Shi” means “a being”, which combined together refers to a civilized human being. They speak Sino-Tibetan language but not have their written history and transcended only in oral form all their culture, tradition, religion and other practices. It is said that the Nyishi have migrated from the north by crossing the mighty river named Supung, (Tsangpo) in China moving towards different directions in batches and sub-groups precisely on the basis of lineage and clan until finally spread over the present location.^v Traditionally, the Nyishi being followed patriarchal system also practiced polygyny as way of lives. Polygyny marriage is a subtype of polygamy where one man marries several women. The practices has both sororal and non-sororal type of polygyny. It was more like a ‘custom and tradition’ to having multiple wife. Men can simply marry as many wives as he can, and he don’t need to seek permission from either his wives or relatives. In contrary, the man theorized to himself for any crucial decision including practicing polygyny. There was a belief system that having more wives and big offspring is a god’s blessing, and thus, every man in the community are looking forward of having many wives and children. The practice of polygyny among the Nyishi is also considerably due to many other reasons. One of the reasons is that it accords higher status and prestige.^{vi} Under this benevolent norm and practice, the men do not want to shrink the image into disadvantage or weak position among the fellow assemblage. Having this attitude is undoubtedly fallacious from the prism of 21st worldview, but it was considered as a form of society. The other reason is to share household/agricultural labour, as the tribes occupies most of the hilly areas and it was difficult for a single wife to manage many tasks or to produce more male children so that they can enlarge their family or clan members in order to protect their family or clan. The least reason is the practice of “Bride Price”, where the groom has to pay a price in money or other materials to the bride’s parents. In most of the cases the bride’s parents were in-debt to groom because they already took a price for their daughter and it become difficult to question groom for practicing polygyny. In fact, the polygyny marks one’s social status and economic stability. This thought process was ingrained largely in the society because it becomes a bulwark during the difficult times for example clan wars or social hunting and different other social activities.^{vii} This system inherited in the society for a long time generation after generation with pride. But, in the recent past, the practice encountered criticism post independence of India largely from the liberal school and women group. The diminishing factor is espoused by many to the advent of modernization and Christianity in the society.

Nyishi Women Status under Polygynous Marriage System

Historically, Women had been considered as less in many societies caused by deeply rooted cultural, social and economic factors. This factor has contributed to the issue of gender inequalities and discrimination against women, both in history or the contemporary time.^{viii} Every aspect of life has a wave in the bygone years but Women in India have historically faced silent oppression, with many arguing that such barbaric practices have been a significant factor in the country’s backwardness. They were entirely dependent on the men who confined their views on the obscurantism of the cultural dogma.^{ix} Their roles were largely limited to domestic duties, childcare, and, in some cases, basic literacy for household management or religious purposes, particularly among wealthier families. The rationale for keeping women secluded from the outside world was a means to suppress them under the rigid control of male supremacy. Due to these prejudices, Indian families often viewed educating their daughters as an economic burden, while educated sons were seen as assets capable of securing work outside the home. In upholding patriarchal hegemony, Indian families deliberately misled their daughters. The essence of this injustice rarely faced confrontation, as the interests of women were consistently subverted to serve the broader interests of male dominance. This subaltern norm cannot be challenge because the marginalized had no platform and their opposition is not counted as criticism. The prevailing social ethos failed to acknowledge the equality of women, and thus their social identity remained incomplete until they formally get married. Over time, these beliefs have perpetuated a status of slavery for women, idolizing them as embodiments of self-sacrifice, submissiveness, and purity. Although these traditional beliefs originated within Hinduism, they have permeated Indian society

across various families and communities. Consequently, the societal mindset regarding women has been further influenced and continued to be considered as a powerful conventional norm in India. Thus, women fall as perpetual victims in the clutch of oppressors. In spite of suffering at the hands of oppressors, there has been little attention from either the feminist movement or feminist literature. In contrast, women were isolated with no space that can be truly called their own, and there is no safe haven for them on earth—all their visible enemies are, in fact, invisible attackers.^x Reflecting on the complexity of the Indian social practice, a renowned historian Bertrand Russell observed that if the people solve their social problems, the religion would wane; if they do not, religion will continue to thrive. Notwithstanding in the Nyishi tribe too the customary law allows polygyny is permissible and socially accepted which consequently discriminates the women by ignoring their basic rights. Multiple marriages create many problems of rivalry, jealousy, frustration, and unequal treatment etc. The women who are in polygynous marriages largely experience double violence. The statement refers that many women under polygynous marriages experience mental and economic suffering as well as sexual and physical violence. They are not financially independent because of which the first wife has to accept other wives of the husband in fear of abandonment.^{xi} For the Nyishi community, polygyny occurs not only for economic reasons but also for social reasons. To give an instance, the polygyny has its roots in the social and economic demands of societies. More wives mean a more bountiful harvest. Accordingly, it is the surplus of wealth for the man from the additional wives. The rich and poor of a man is then judged by the number of wives for the wives share the benefits of his prestige and enjoy the security of his household.^{xii} During a comprehensive field visit conducted in both urban and rural areas under the dominion of the Nyishi tribe in Arunachal Pradesh, particularly within the Papumpare district, a disturbing trend of domestic violence and mental distress among women has been unveiled. The findings indicate that a significant percentage, approximately 39.2%, of women have experienced some form of domestic violence, while a considerable number, around 32.34%, have suffered from mental pressure inflicted by their husbands. These figures are a stark reminder of the challenges faced by women in their marital lives, but the situation is even more dire for some. A heart-breaking reality is that nearly 4.9% of women have been subjected to separation, and a further 6.86% have been abandoned by their husbands, often as a consequence of the husband taking a second or third wife through the practice of polygyny. This cultural norm, deeply rooted in the Nyishi community, has had a profound impact on both mental and physical well-being of women. The psychological toll of living in a polygynous household, where the fear of being replaced or neglected is ever-present, has led to a pervasive sense of insecurity and unrest among these women. The practice of polygyny, therefore, not only disrupts the peace of mind and stability in their marital lives but also contributes to a cycle of physical and emotional harm, leaving a lasting impact on the women and the community at large.

Change and Continuity of Polygyny in Nyishi Tribe

In contemporary time, the practice of polygyny is discouraged in the state but socially approved and granted permission under pretext for taking multiple wives, varying from not being served food to taking care of the family to not having a male child. Polygyny is seen as a lifestyle in the Nyishi tribe even in recent time.^{xiii} It looks difficult to surrender this obscurant practice as they had been practicing since the time immemorial. According to Wastermack, polygyny was a pride of men to have many wives and large family. In his book "A Short History of Marriage", he reiterates that most of the reason for a male to practice polygyny was the yearning for lust.^{xiv} With this intention, the men continue to like the beauty of young females despite having a wife, and this led to the next marriage.^{xv} The practice of polygyny has historically been intertwined with notions of wealth and social status within the Nyishi tribe. It was often seen as a testament to a man's prosperity and his standing in the community; the more wives he could support, the greater his perceived success and importance. This cultural perception has influenced the dynamics of marriage and has had varied impacts on the women involved. Women who participate in plural marriages often cite different reasons for their choices.^{xvi} Love for the man is frequently mentioned as a primary motivator. Despite the complexities and challenges that come with sharing a husband, some women are driven by their emotional connection and affection for the man, which leads them to accept and even seek a place within a polygynous marriage. Another significant factor is the allure of material possessions, particularly among younger women. In a society where economic stability and the ability to acquire luxury items are highly valued, the promise of a comfortable lifestyle can be a compelling reason for entering into a polygynous

marriage. For some women, the security and financial independence that a wealthy husband can provide outweigh the drawbacks of not having him to themselves. As the 21st century has progressed, the desire for luxury items and a comfortable lifestyle has only intensified, further complicating the reasons behind women's decisions to become part of polygynous marriages. The daily pressures of modern life and the societal emphasis on material success can make the offers from married men, who promise to fulfill these desires, difficult to refuse. For some women, the prospect of financial independence and the ability to meet their daily needs and indulge in luxuries can overshadow the potential drawbacks of sharing a husband. It is important to note that while some women may willingly enter into polygynous marriages for these reasons, the practice is not without its critics. Feminists and advocates for gender equality argue that polygyny can perpetuate inequalities and reinforce patriarchal structures, where men hold the power and women are often left competing for resources and attention. The decision to enter such marriages is influenced by a complex interplay of personal desires, economic pressures, and cultural norms, and it is not always a straightforward choice between love and material gain. In addressing the issues surrounding polygyny, it is crucial to consider the diverse motivations and circumstances of the women involved. While some may find contentment and security within these arrangements, others may face significant challenges and hardships. Understanding these dynamics is essential for any meaningful discussion or intervention aimed at supporting the well-being of women in polygynous marriages. Subsequently, the minor girls usually get victimized from the luring of married men just to secure their future and getting a better life. The women generally worried about their future life settlement but later found out the illicit life of their husband, who are already married one or two wives before their marriage. In some cases, a partner or husband goes on to build relations with other young girls after the marriage. Responding to the issue that is widely prevalent in the society, a well-known social activist Smt. Rija said that most of the women experienced this problem and it has degraded the values of not only one woman but brought scares to the whole women and society. The women later start questioning their weaknesses to tackle this menace. In other words, this practice has brought a crisis of self-confidence. Consequently, she further reiterates that women who face this situation usually encountered emotional effects in their married lives. Thus the women organisations in Arunachal Pradesh are organising awareness campaigns to stop this practice by conversing with the government and social leaders.

Perception of Nyishi Women on Polygyny System

This age-old tradition of polygyny has become an important and serious issue for women in the community in the 21st century. Though it was widely regarded and followed in the past, this practice has become redundant in the present era where both men and women were treated equal. Polygyny is a legacy of uncivilized times and that cannot be transcended in today's day and age.^{xvii} It needs immediate repulsion or discourages the practice in the society because it directly impacts not only on the women but also on the family and society especially the young girls. Polygyny is a complex issue that touches emotional, moral, sexual, and legal aspects of marriage. It deeply ingrained cultural, social, economic and political factors have contributed to gender inequality and discrimination against women in the present contemporary time.^{xviii} Many women organisations came up with a debate regarding polygyny. The movement against polygyny in Arunachal Pradesh has gained momentum with the active involvement of women's organizations, who have taken a public stand to advocate for the banning of the practice. Recognizing the detrimental effects of polygyny on women's rights and well-being, these organizations have sought to challenge the cultural norm through legislative action. One of the key initiatives has been the proposal of the 'Arunachal Pradesh Monogamy Election Eligibility Bill, 2023.' This bill represents a bold step towards promoting monogamy as the preferred marital practice in the state. It suggests that men should be limited to having only one spouse and further ties this principle to electoral rights, proposing that only men in monogamous relationships should be eligible to vote during elections. This strategic approach aims to leverage the influence of electoral participation to encourage men to adopt monogamy. The bill's introduction has sparked the debate about the role of marriage in society and the demand for legal reforms to protect women's rights. It reflects a growing awareness among women's groups of the importance of using legislative tools to effect social change. By advocating for the bill, these organizations are not only seeking to ban polygyny but also to empower women by ensuring their partners adhere to monogamous relationships, which can lead to more stable and equitable family structures. In addition to the bill, female legislators in the state

Assembly have also played a crucial role in pushing for the outlining of general regulations for marriage that would restrict polygyny under strict rules. Their recommendations highlight the need for comprehensive legal frameworks that can address the complexities of marital practices and protect the rights of all citizens, particularly women. The efforts of women's organizations in Arunachal Pradesh demonstrate a concerted push towards modernizing marriage laws and aligning them with principles of gender equality and human rights. By advocating for the 'Arunachal Pradesh Monogamy Election Eligibility Bill, 2023,' and pushing for regulations that restrict polygyny, these groups are challenging deep-rooted cultural practices and working towards a more equitable society where women's rights are upheld and respected. It is important to note that such initiatives face various challenges, including resistance from those who view polygyny as a cultural norm. However, the growing support for these reforms indicates a shift in public opinion and a recognition of the need to protect women from the harms associated with polygynous relationships. The success of these efforts will depend on the ability of advocates to build broad coalitions, engage in public dialogue, and work with policymakers to enact and enforce laws that promote gender equality and end the practice of polygyny.

Conclusion

The practise of polygyny has a mixed perception among the Nyishi community. The women folks are exploring more of bringing reform in the practice or do away in toto as it is exploiting and discriminating the rights of women. The general consensus of women is that in the past the practice of polygyny had been considered as a matter of pride and economic prosperity, but with the changes of time and more particularly in the 21st century where the society largely expose with the modern world, the continuity of it outrightly goes against the modern values and ethics. There are many instances where men are misusing the system and create problem in the family. However, it is time to collective tackle this social demonism and brings justice for the cause of gender equality and justice for all regardless of men and women. In doing so, there should be a targeted awareness campaigns and educational programs to promote gender equality and women empowerment within the Nyishi community, specifically addressing the harmful effects of polygyny on women. Secondly, the state should make efforts to encourage legal reforms and ensure that the practice of polygyny is regulated. Thirdly, focus on alternative livelihood opportunity is engineered to do away the practice of polygyny in the society. Fourthly, it is also requires to strengthening Women's Organizations.

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