

Polygamous Marriages in India

Polygamy prevailed in ancient India. In modern times, the Hindu Marriage Act, applicable to a majority of Indians, prohibits its practice and declares the marriage void if either of the partners have a living spouse at the time of marriage. However, in communities polygamous marriages still exist though its extent is not known. The 2005-06 National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) included questions on this issue and some important findings are – 2 percent of women reported that their husband had other wives besides herself. Husband's of women with no children are more likely to have multiple wives (2.51 partners) than women who have at least one child (1.80 partners). This study proposes to analyze NFHS-3 data using advanced statistical techniques to understand the profile of women living in such polygamous marriages and to understand the cultural and regional correlates of such marriages. In India, marriage is practiced mainly for progeny and having a son is considered essential. In this context, the role of childlessness and son preference leading to polygamous marriages will be investigated.

Polygamy means a system of marriage whereby a person has more than one spouse. Polygamy can be of two types – one is polygyny where a man marries more than one woman, and the other is polyandry, where a woman marries more than one man. Polygamy and polyandry were prevalent in ancient India, but it is doubtful whether they were ever popular in the public opinion. It was practiced mostly by the warrior castes and rich merchants. Polygamy in ancient India was a matter of personal choice, status symbol and at times social, moral and religious obligation. Marriage in traditional Hinduism was meant for progeny and carrying out obligatory duties in accordance of a person's dharma so that the four major aims of human life could be realized. If polygamy served these ideals, the Hindu law books did not object to its practice. However, certain rules were laid down for its practice like who can marry more than once, whom one can marry again, etc. The book Yagnavalkya Smriti prescribes that men should marry women who were not married before. But the same rule was not mentioned in case of men. This book suggests that if 'a man's wife drinks alcohol, is sickly, cantankerous, barren, wastes money, quarrelsome, begets only female children or is hostile to men, then he may take another wife.' In Islam, limited polygyny is permitted; whereas polyandry is completely prohibited.

In today's times, marriage laws are well defined for every religion and these are to be practiced very strictly. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 It is illegal for a man to have more than one wife. Islam is another religion followed by a large number of people in India and it also has its own set of laws. Quran, the holy book of Muslims, is the only religious scripture in the world that says 'marry only one'(Zakir Naik, 1995). The claim is that in no other religious book there is this instruction to have only one wife. According to the Hindu religious scriptures, whether it be the Vedas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata or the Geeta, one can marry as many as one wishes. It was only later, that the Hindu priests restricted the number of wives to one.

In earlier times, Christian men were permitted as many wives as they wished, since the Bible puts no restriction on the number of wives. It was only a few centuries ago that the Church restricted the number of wives to one.

In modern times, a person is bound by the marriage laws laid down by their religion and have to be adhered to and any deviation from the norms are considered to be illegal. Until recently, no scientific data also was available at the national or regional level to assess whether polygamy is still practiced or is non-existent. For the first time data required to study and understand such marriage practices was collected as part of the 2005-06 National Family Health Survey. Data was collected from both women and men – women were asked a direct question whether besides herself, her husband had other wives and men were asked if they currently have one wife or more than one wife.

Preliminary analysis of this data reveals some interesting findings on this aspect of marriage. In India as a whole, two percent of women reported that their husband had other wives besides herself. Urban-rural differentials are marginal (1.5% in urban areas and 2% in rural areas). Husband's of older women, women with less education are more likely to have multiple wives than husband's of younger women and women with higher levels of education. Spouses of women age less than 30 have about 1.35 partners whereas husband's of women age 30 or more have 2.22 to 2.51 partners. One interesting finding is that women across religious groups – Hindu (1.77 partners), Muslim (2.55 partners), Christian (2.35 partners), Buddhist (3.41 partners) have reported that their husband's have multiple wives. It is more common for husband's of women belonging to scheduled castes and tribes to have multiple wives than women belonging to other caste/tribe groups.

Differentials in this characteristic are not only by background characteristics of the women but also a clear regional variation emerges from the findings of the survey. Polygamy is more prevalent in the Eastern (2.11 partners), Northeastern (3.20 partners) and Southern (3.02 partners) regions. In the northern and central regions, it is non-existent as the women from these regions have reported their husbands to be having only one partner on an average.

The general thought in India is that marriage is practiced mainly for progeny, i.e., to have children to continue the lineage. Also, we need to understand marriage practices in the context of strong son preference that exist in most parts of India. The data clearly shows that husband's of women with no children are more likely to have multiple wives (2.51 partners) than women who have at least one child (1.80 partners).

In today's times of declining sex ratios and gender inequalities, a study of this sort would throw light at a different aspect about women facing such spousal abuse and discrimination.

This study proposes to understand the profile of women whose husband has more than one wife. An attempt will be made to investigate the role of childlessness in having multiple wives. This study proposes to analyze NFHS-3 data using statistical techniques to understand the profile of women living in such polygamous marriages and to understand the cultural and regional correlates of such marriages. In India marriage is practiced mainly for progeny and having a son is considered essential. In this context, the role of childlessness and son preference leading to polygamous marriages will be investigated.