



POLYGAMY: INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE ENDURING TRACES OF MISHMI SOCIAL PRACTICE

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Arunachal Pradesh is home to 26 major tribes and 110 sub tribes as mentioned by The Government of Arunachal Pradesh in its documents, books and the yearly diary published by the Information and Public Relations (IPR) Department. Polygamy is a prevalent social practice in several of the 26 tribes including Mishmi tribe of Anjaw, Lohit, Lower Dibang Valley and Dibang Valley districts. From the antiquity, simultaneous plural marriages were practiced by Mishmi men with considerable resources and elevated social status. There are two types of Polygamy practiced in Mishmi society; One in which the living sibling marries the widow of his dead brother or cousin. Sometimes a man would also marry the widowed aunt of his dead uncle. In certain instances a living adult son even marries his step mother after the demise of his father. The other kind of polygamous marriage is the commonly practiced norm of acquiring several wives while his first spouse is alive.

The matrimonial system of Mishmi constitutes exchange of dowry in the form of livestock like Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*), Pigs, cattle, dried/smoked meat of wild animals and birds and fish. The groom offers the dowry as bride price to the bride's family. After ceremonial exchange of the bride price, the bride leaves her paternal home and starts living at her husband's household. A prosperous man who is capable of offering dowry many times over will marry many women in his life time. All these wives have to share common dwelling with each having a personal chamber. The husband would take turns to visit his several wives in their chambers. An acclaimed legend of polygamous marriages is a Kaman Mishmi man from Tezu who is believed to have married 16 wives.

Polygamy might have had its social relevance in bygone era when it had a practical purpose. Since all farm work was carried out manually, more hands in the family was directly correlated to higher production of food grains for the household. Polygamy was a socially accepted form of marriage system across both the genders as patriarchy was so deeply entrenched in the collective consciousness of the tribe that the idea of women's rights or the mere awareness of injustice endured by the women didn't exist. But the cultural values of the past do not align with the values of contemporary Mishmi women. Education and exposure to the world beyond the hills of Arunachal Pradesh have gradually influenced social norms, leading tribal women to increasingly prefer and idealize monogamy as the ideal attachment style within the institution of marriage. The paper strives to highlight the curse of Polygamy that women still experience today. It details the struggles of an educated modern Mishmi woman whose sensibilities have been framed by the Judeo-Christian values subconsciously imbibed through the existing traces of Macaulay's education model in India, romantic ideals formed by the philosophy of Rousseau as depicted in romantic novels, Bollywood movies, music and behavioral ethics influenced by majoritarian culture of India. Skewed gender dynamics persist, where a woman is expected to be educated, gainfully employed and yet bear the burden of archaic patriarchal oppression like polygamy. The paper endeavors to dwell into the intricacies of 21st century Mishmi women's psyche and bring about a discussion on harmful consequences of polygamy on women in particular and society as a whole in civic discourse.

Keywords: Polygamy, Mishmi, Women, Patriarchy, Gender

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Introduction

The Mishmi Tribe and its Languages, Arunachal Pradesh is home to twenty six major tribes and one hundred ten sub tribes as mentioned by The Government of Arunachal Pradesh in its documents, books and the yearly diary published by the Information and Public Relations (IPR) Department. Mishmi is considered amongst the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh with "Mishmi people consisting of three separate ethnic groups speaking distinct languages, the Idu, Tawra [=Digaru] and the Kman [=Miju]" (Blench 1). According to the linguists Grierson and Konow "all these three languages are classified as the 'North Assam' group

of Tibeto-Burman speech family. An intriguing feature of the Mishmi tribe is that Idu and Tawra languages are similar in many aspects and are linked together in a subgroup called 'Digarish', while Kmaan is distinct. It appears that "despite the overt linguistic differences, Tawra and Kman are held to be two aspects of the same culture and unrelated to Idu" (Blench ii).

The habitation of Mishmi people spans across Arunachal Pradesh and parts of Tibet and Myanmar. In India, the two sub tribes of Mishmi Tawra/Digar and Kaman/Miju inhabit the eastern most districts of Arunachal Pradesh Lohit and Anjaw, while the Idu Mishmis dwell in the Dibang Valley and Lower Dibang Valley districts. According to the 2011 census the population of Kaman and Tawra Mishmi is around 37000 and Idu Mishmis make about a population of 12000. Ethnographically, the Mishmis belong to Indo-Mongoloid stock.

The main focus of this paper is on the status of women in Tawra/Digar and Kaman/Miju Mishmi sub tribes of Lohit and Anjaw districts of Arunachal Pradesh. 'Mishmi' herein refers to Kaman and Tawra speakers who although speak two distinct dialects, share a common culture, tradition, religious rituals and practices. They also exist in an identical social structure and live harmoniously among themselves.

The Mishmi family is patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal. Like any other tribal society there are numerous ways of acquiring mates in Mishmi society. The different types of marriage systems in Mishmi are arranged marriage, marriage by mutual consent and elopement, marriage by abduction or persuasive coercion of the bride, forceful marriage which is arranged by the parents of the bride and groom who want to establish a preferred social bond, often without the full consent of the couple. Marriage by Intrusion in which the jilted lover forcefully enters the house of her lover in case the man refuses to marry her after making physical relationship; surrogate marriage wherein if the wife of a man dies, then he marries the elder or younger sister of the deceased wife; levirate marriage of marrying the widow of his brother, uncle and sometimes even the widowed step mother and preferential marriage which consists of cross cousin marriage or marrying the daughter of maternal uncle.

Marriage is formally solemnized by paying of bride price by the groom to the bride's parents or guardians. The Tawra/Digar word for marriage is 'Miya Braiya' which literally translates to buying of a woman while the Kaman/Miju word for marriage is 'Ngit Ta-nul' which means to pay the price of a woman. This bride price is offered in the form of Mithun (*Bos frontalis*), Buffalo and Cattle. Other marriage offerings consists of pigs, smoked fish and meat of wild animals like deer, boar, Mishmi takin etc. The bride price is fixed by the bride's father and the groom's family has to comply with such demands. The parents of the bride in return give cash, jewelry, utensils of copper and brass etc. to their daughter and the groom party in accordance with the value of the bride price. "The age old system prevails among the Mishmis is not exactly the bride price rather it is reciprocal in nature as both the groom and bride parties exchange valuables relating to marriage" (Pandey 49).

Mishmis generally practice Monogamy however polygamy or polygyny in particular is a socially accepted form of marriage which was very much prevalent in the past and continues to be practiced today.

Polygamy in Mishmi Society: Traditions and Continuity

Polygamy is generally defined as a marital relationship involving multiple spouses. The different types of polygamy include polygyny, 'voluntary union of one man to multiple wives', polyandry, the marriage of one woman to multiple men, and polygynandry, the union of multiple husbands to multiple wives (Al-Krenawi, 2001; Elbendour et al. 2002). (Shepard).

In ancient times, before the advent of modernism in the tribal society in Arunachal Pradesh, Polygyny the practice of marrying several wives by a single man with considerable resources and elevated social status, was an accepted and celebrated form of marriage. Early Western historians, anthropologists and travelers had observed and documented the practice of polygyny among the Mishmi tribe. R. Wilcox has recorded in 1825-28 that among the Mishmis "polygamy is allowed, that limit is only the inability or disinclination of the chief to exchange more hill cattle for new wives" (374). W. Griffith writing in 1836 has recorded that "want of means forms the only limit to the number of wives of a Meeshmee. A rich man, who was at his disposal numerous cattle, etc. will give 20 mithuns; but the wife appears to bring with her slaves etc. as a return" (118). Dalton in 1872 writes "They (Mishmi) are extensive polygamists. Each man may have as many wives as he can afford to purchase, the price ranging from a pig to a bonus of twenty oxen" (16). Cooper in 1873 had recorded "this peculiar custom, when man has many wives (and he always keeps as many as he can afford), often prevents him from eating flesh in any house in the village" (183). This is relating to the custom amongst the Mishmis where the son-in-law is barred from consuming meat at his wife's parental home. A man with many wives doesn't get to eat meat in that many households.

The inevitable result is that the great majority of women have large and happy families. J.F. Needham in his report on the Bebejiya Mishmi expedition, 1899-1909 had noted that "when a man wishes to marry, he asks the girl's parent's consent and makes them a due propitiatory presents (Pandey 44).

Types of Polygamy

There are different types of Polygamy practiced in the Mishmi society.

1. A married man marries the widow of his dead brother or cousin. Sometimes he would also marry the widowed aunt of his dead uncle. In certain instances an adult son even marries his step mother after the demise of his father.
2. The other kind of polygynous marriage is the commonly practiced norm of acquiring several wives while his first spouse is alive.
3. In few polygynous marriages, a man marries two or more sisters from the same parents.

Historical reasons for practicing polygyny

1. The main impetus behind polygyny was prestige demonstration in the society by wealthy men as acquiring a wife is an expensive affair.
2. The other major motivation was to get additional hand in agricultural work since all the field work was done with bare hands. More people employed in the fields would ensure more food grains for the common household. In a way polygyny ensured food safety for the family.
3. Polygyny also secured the financial position of the husband as each wife would bring valuable jewelry and other movable assets along with her from her parental home. Thus, the collective wealth of the household increased, further elevating the husband's status in the society. The wives, in turn, willingly complied, as they too derived prestige (though from the periphery) by being associated with a powerful man. Often, a woman from the dominant clan would also bring her personal slaves into her marital home. The slaves would help her in domestic chores as well as engage in field work.
4. In the past, Mishmis frequently participated in inter clan warfare and lived in a lawless chaotic environment. In such circumstances, men would marry women from different clans to forge strong social alliances.
5. Under certain circumstances Polygyny was practiced as a social obligation. A married man would marry the widow of his deceased brother or uncle. This ensured the safety of his deceased brother's wife and children.
6. The most important reason is the need for progeny. Mishmis are fond of children preferably boys who one day would support them in their old age (Pandey 2018). In the absence of modern medical intervention, life was precarious and unpredictable with very high child mortality rate. Mishmi men feared that he might be left with no heir so he would want to sire as many male children as possible to carry on his legacy. An affluent man could afford to marry as many wives as he pleased; there is no set limit for polygamy. Same privilege was not enjoyed by poor people as they could not afford the bride price.

Special Status of Arunachal Pradesh

Article 371 of Indian Constitution bestows "Special Status" on twelve states including six in Northeast. Different clauses under 371 have been incorporated for different states according to the specific needs of the state. Arunachal Pradesh has special status as ascribed via Article 371 H. These special provisions are enshrined to preserve the local customs, traditions and laws of the state while maintaining alignment with the Indian constitution.

Arunachal Pradesh is a protected state which enforces Inner Line Permit under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations, 1873. The Inner Line Regulation prohibits the travel of outsiders inside Arunachal Pradesh without a valid permit. Imperial era regulations like Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations, 1873 and the Balipara/Tirap/Sadiya Frontier Tract Jhum Land Regulation, 1947 provide temporary protection to the state. Arunachal Pradesh also became "Special Category State" in 1987.

The constitution of India provides all these provisions in an effort to protect the cultural identity, customary laws and economic interests of the vulnerable tribal communities. To this end, ancient customary laws remain in effect in Arunachal Pradesh alongside the constitutional and judicial laws of the country. Family and social laws are still very much governed by traditional customs. Tribal customary laws have legal binding in the state due to its geographically and socially complex landscape, where numerous tribes and sub tribes maintain distinct sociological structures and perspectives.

There are many positive aspects and negative impacts of the old traditional customary laws. Customary laws are cost effective and reduce delay in providing justice. It is accessible to lowest denomination of the society and effective in resolution of community based conflicts. But the major concern is that there is skewed gender representation in the traditional arbitrary system called as "Kebang" in Arunachal Pradesh. It's the men who predominantly occupy the position as the guardians of customary law. In some tribes it's exclusively a men's congregation. These guardians of tradition are typically esteemed elders within the community. Although they have command over the old traditional laws, they lack the insight pertaining to the concerns of educated modern women and have limited awareness about the contemporary legal system. In such highly patriarchal society, the likelihood of achieving justice for a woman in contrast to man is very thin. Laws are meant to maintain social order, protect the personal rights of each individual and above all to deliver justice to the aggrieved. Any legal or judiciary system that has different parameters for men and women in dispensing justice is inherently unjust, structurally biased and a tool of systemic oppression rather than true justice.

Polygamy the persisting remnants of archaic social practice

The Indian state's recognition of tribal customary laws has allowed many archaic customary social practices to persist, particularly in Mishmi society and Arunachal Pradesh as a whole. Polygyny is one such social evil that has widespread social acceptance in Arunachal Pradesh in comparison to other states of India. With changing time, Indian society has evolved, embracing reforms in its traditions and shifting its attitude towards women, gradually moving toward a more egalitarian society. Kings and members of royal families in the antiquity practiced polygamy for varied reasons but the larger Indian society has abolished the practice of polygamy. Section 494 and 495 of the Indian penal code of 1860 prohibited polygamy for the Christians. Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 prohibited polygamous marriage in the Hindu communities. But we are yet to see the dawn of polygamy's abolition in Arunachal Pradesh. According to the data from the National Family Health Survey in 2019-21, 3.7 % of marriages in Arunachal Pradesh are Polygynous in nature; more than double the figure of national average of 1.4% and the global figure of 2%. What is more disturbing is the fact that the actual figure of polygyny in the state is likely higher, as many polygynous couples are reluctant to disclose their private life to outsiders. The unwillingness of Arunachali men to ban polygamy

is evident by the refusal of the Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly to table, let alone discuss, 'The Arunachal Pradesh Monogamy Election Eligibility Bill, 2023'. Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare society (APWWS), a prominent women's group in the state, has been actively raising voice against polygamy and rallying for support to introduce the bill. APWWS president Kani Nada Maling said 'the refusal to discuss the bill was a sign of patriarchal mindset' (Scroll.in Oct 06, 2023). In 2023, at least seven members in the legislative assembly had multiple wives. Currently one female member, ironically the 'Minister of Women and Child Development' was a third wife to her husband who also was the former Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh. 'Additionally, it's worth noting that, of the nine chief ministers, six have had multiple wives, indicating a wide acceptance and tolerance of polygyny in Arunachali society' (The Arunachal Times October 09, 2023). Tongam Rina, Associate Editor of the daily highlights that 'in many societies, polygamy is seen as a lifestyle, but in Arunachal it is a social issue that is often challenging to discuss'. Activist Maling adds that 'Polygamy has social sanction in Arunachal, and people are taking advantage of this. No woman is secure in our state as a man can marry two or three wives whenever he wants. Women are used as tools here' (Scroll.in Oct 06, 2023).

Polygamy and Intersectionality in the Modern Context

Polygyny is not just a form of social evil or a matter of personal choice; it's a complex issue with many variables coming in play. These are systemic issues, perpetration of oppressive patriarchal values. A modern, educated Mishmi woman has developed sensibilities that differ greatly from those of her ancestors. Her values have been shaped by the modern Indian education system which continues to follow the Macaulay's education policy of 1835 to major extent. This policy declared for dissemination of English literature and sciences through the medium of English language. Thus, she has unconsciously imbibed the Judeo-Christian values of the West through English language and literature. An educated Mishmi woman is influenced by the Western philosophy of justice, freedom and equality. Her social behavior has been molded by the majoritarian culture of the country through interaction and exposure to the outside world. The attachment style framed by the ideals of Romanticism as depicted in pop culture through literature, music, movies, digital technology, social media influencers, celebrities and activism. She is an enlightened individual who values emotion and sentiment, understands the importance of individuality, and idealizes love and relationship. Educated women are aware of the injustices inflicted on women on the name of customary traditions. Therefore, the majority of Mishmi women today are actively raising strong protests against the practice of polygamy.

Polygyny: an instrument of Injustice

1. Emotional Trauma of First Wives – First wives experience deep emotional pain, betrayal and humiliation when their husbands take additional wives. Society often expects them to endure this suffering, reinforcing their oppression. Many studies on polygamous marriages indicate that women in polygamous marriage had worsened mental health as compared to women in monogamous marriages.
2. Spousal Violence in Polygyny – Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society (APWWS) in its letter to the Governor of Arunachal Pradesh had sought his intervention in enacting laws to ban polygamy and bigamy. They mentioned that a disturbing surge in cases of domestic violence and homicide directly linked to the abhorrent practice of polygamy and bigamy. They also mentioned that 'the absence of adequate legislation has provided breeding ground for the proliferation of polygamy'. APWWS President Maling also highlighted two recent incidents of homicides, both instances having suspected involvement of the husband and his mistress for the death of first wives. (The Arunachal Times April 09, 2024).
3. Impact on Children – The children of first wives often feel neglected, insecure or less valued as their father divides his attention between him and his step siblings. They also experience trauma by witnessing their mother in distressed condition. They may feel abandoned or less valued, leading to low self esteem, emotional instability and a life long struggle for validation.
4. Reducing women as objects – Many powerful, wealthy and influential men practice polygyny without any sense of moral or ethical responsibility. They exploit their status, while society normalizes their action instead of holding them accountable. They build their false sense of privilege at women's expense. In polygynous marriage, body of a woman is treated like a baby making machine. She is considered as a valuable asset to her husband only if she can birth children. Her worth as an individual is disregarded in a polygynous society.
5. Polygyny as an Extension of Economic Inequality – In monogamous societies, wealth inequality still exists, but marriage remains somewhat more balanced, every man and woman has relatively equal chance to form a family. In polygynous societies, wealth allows men to monopolize women turning marriage into a competition where only the rich can 'win'. Women, particularly from struggling families, often see marriage to a wealthy polygamous man as their only route to financial security, reinforcing the cycle of inequality.
6. Exploitation of Women's Economic and Social Vulnerability – Many polygynous marriages involve men marrying much younger women, reinforcing power imbalances. The entry for a young girl into polygynous marriage is a one way route, wherein she can never divorce her husband unilaterally but her husband can bring in as many wives as he pleases into the polygynous set up. This clearly demonstrates the moral double standards of these men.
7. Economic Instability in Large Families – Many polygynous households face economic strain, within limited resources spread thinly across numerous children. This can affect access to quality of education, healthcare and overall opportunities especially for the children from less favoured wives.
8. Biological Consequence of Polygyny – A disproportionate number of children from wealthy, powerful men means

future generations will be dominated by their lineage, sidelining those from poorer backgrounds. This could have dangerous biological consequence when reproduction is monopolized by a select group of individuals. Fewer men contributing to the gene pool could potentially lead to reduction in genetic diversity in a small tribal community like Mishmi, when a small subset of men fathers a disproportionately larger number of offspring, while the others are excluded from reproduction. Ultimately leading to weakened evolutionary fitness of the tribe.

9. Social Consequences – Polygyny causes social injustice as it denies many men the opportunity to build families, and strengthens class divisions here only the rich can afford multiple wives, perpetuating a system of inequality.

Challenges in the Struggle against Polygyny

1. Selective Modernization: Accepting Progress in Governance but Rejecting it in Marriage: People follow legal framework in administration, governance and judiciary without resistance. They respect state laws regarding property, taxation, employment and crime knowing that modern legal structure provides stability and order. Despite this openness to modernization in public life, many people stubbornly defend polygyny as an unchangeable cultural tradition, refusing to apply modern moral and ethical standards in marriage.
2. Hypocrisy of the Elite and Educated Class: Educated men and women who thrive in modern institutions still support or tolerate polygyny, exposing their internalized patriarchal conditioning. They accept gender equality in workplaces or politics but not in marriage, where they defend male privilege. Many highly educated men, including bureaucrats, politicians and intellectuals follow modern legal systems at work and for safeguarding of his property but weaponizes customary laws to practice polygamy. The powerful men should lead by example to establish positive societal norm, instead they blatantly indulge in adultery in the garb of customary practice.
3. Resistance to Social Evolution: While societies evolve in governance, economy, and technology, many in Arunachal refuse to acknowledge that social customs must evolve too. They embrace western style education, administration, technology etc. but insist on continuation of ancient customary laws with respect to marriage and relationship.
4. Women as Active Participant in Polygyny: Some highly educated women do not challenge polygyny because they benefit from the status quo, especially if they themselves come from polygynous households that have social and financial privileges. These women believe polygyny is normal or even beneficial because they have subconsciously internalized patriarchy that teaches them that a man's desires are more important than a woman's rights. Many opportunist women readily enter into polygynous marriage to fulfill her desire for financial security without social judgment. Social acceptance of polygamy frees her from public scrutiny and judgment of being labeled as "Gold Digger". They can easily shrug off the moral consequences of disrupting an existing marriage. In absence of any social deterrent, an adulterous man and an opportunist woman can justify their action as cultural compliance rather than opportunism.

Breaking the Cycle: Challenging Contradictions

1. Expose the Contradiction Publicly – Speak out loud and clearly articulate the cycle of hypocrisy where people embrace modernity in governance and education but cling to regressive marriage customs like polygyny. Use real life examples of educated, influential men who follow modern laws in their careers yet exploit polygyny for personal benefit.
2. Demand Legal Reforms to Match Moral Standards – Advocate for Arunachal Pradesh to implement a legal ban on polygamy, aligning marriage laws with modern principles of justice. Pressure policy makers, legal professionals, and activists to acknowledge and address the injustice perpetrated on women in the name of tradition. Highlight that polygyny is not a "cultural practice" but a violation of women's rights and must be treated as such.
3. Challenge Educated Women's Silence – The reluctant educated women, especially those belonging to the elite families must be encouraged to speak against polygyny. Push for solidarity among women, showing that breaking polygyny cycle benefits all women, not just first wives.
4. Hold influential Men Accountable – Educated and influential men, bureaucrats, politicians and leaders should not be allowed to hide behind tradition when they practice polygyny. Demand public discussions on how polygyny reflects moral and ethical failures in leadership. Use platform like social media, public debates and community meetings to challenge these powerful men directly and expose their contradictions.
5. Push for Social Shame, Not Acceptance – Shift the narrative so that polygyny is no longer seen as a sign of power or prestige but a shameful practice that reveals a man's failure to uphold ethical responsibility.
6. Promote Modern Ethical Standards in Marriage – Encourage young men and women to view marriage as a partnership of equals, not a hierarchical structure where men hold unchecked power. Normalize discussions about monogamous commitment, respect and dignity in marriage, just as people now accept modern legal and administrative systems.
7. Use Cultural Pride as a Counterargument – Many defend polygyny under the pretext of "protecting culture". Counter this by showing how cultural pride should be based on progress and ethical strength, not outdated oppression.

Conclusion

Polygyny is not just a matter of personal choice, it's a structural system of power, privilege and social injustice that disproportionately harms women and destabilizes society. Many argue that polygyny is about "consent" and individual freedom but this so called choice is often shaped by coercion, economic necessity and deeply ingrained patriarchal conditioning. Women rarely enter polygynous marriages as equals; they do so under social and economic pressure, while men especially wealthy and

influential ones exploit the system for their benefit. Economic and social consequences of polygyny, hoarding women, reducing marriage opportunities for poorer men and reinforcing elitist bloodlines is a threat to basic human rights. Polygyny isn't just about gender inequality; it deepens class divisions and social instability. So no, polygyny is not merely a personal choice or harmless tradition, it is a systemic issue with far reaching consequences. Mishmi society should confront this truth and make its people realize that true progress will only happen when society stops using "culture" as an excuse for male and female opportunism.

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