

POLYGAMY'S CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES: A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON CO-WIVES COPING STRATEGIES AND THEIR LINKAGES WITH ENVIRONMENTAL LAW

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Abstract

The study utilized an exploratory qualitative method to gather data from polygamous/Bigamous women who agreed to an in-depth interview. It aimed to examine the cultural aesthetics caused by polygamy, the results, and the coping mechanisms adopted by women to navigate to deal with co-wives' relationships and their consequences. The paper initially looked into the key causes behind polygamy which were found to be related to infertility, having only female children, love marriage by husband, pressure from the in-laws' families, and a desire to preserve their marriage rather than ending it. The second theme pertains to the negative effects of polygamy, such as loneliness, sadness, and jealousy brought in by injustice. Besides, these, polygamy has different perspectives too i.e benefits of it, like sharing household duties and raising children. Although polygamous women acknowledge that there are drawbacks to their lifestyle, they do not see divorce as a possibility. Whether legal think tanks & policy makers, legislators should pass laws for the protection of polygamous women since they are subject to passive injustice. To handle the stress and other effects of polygamy, through the integration of cultural studies, the study delves into the dimensions of neo-social norms, gender issues, and familial requisites in shaping the stem of polygamous marriage vis-a-vis cultural resilience and they need to be trained through various seminars and programs.

Keywords: Polygamy, law, culture, marriage, co- wives and adverse effects.

Introduction

Even though, the past for the minority was horrifying, historical consciousness can be created by understanding cultural politics and the past. Meanwhile, history has evolved into a defense tool and a way to theorize the past, which impacts the present and the future. Since history is the cultivation of identity, theorizing histories through stochastic blow in forming a nation-state would be unfair in a large, varied nation like India. Agricultural cultivation is undoubtedly associated with remaking, replanting, and reorganizing. Still, if a cultural invasion occurred, the tendency to rewrite history to absolutize the culture would rather signify invisible dominance. It appears that the elites' idea of history, which was a crude simplification, was governed by the underlying psychology of dominance, which also affected the state apparatus. For instance, in the history of Islam, males have to have up to four wives simultaneously, but it also stipulates that there must be justice and equality in all of a man's material possessions. The Holy Quran gives Muslim households the legal justification for polygamy, saying, "*Marry women of your choice two, or three, or four, but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one.*" Although it has been asserted numerous places that this verse of Holy Quran supports monogamy when a man cannot uphold equity and justice for each of his wives.

Polygamy is officially supported by majority of Muslims. In Muslim society, polygamy is considered acceptable since it is both a just and proper way to relate and is supported by Islamic doctrine. It protects the family from sexually transmitted infections and possible changes to an illicit sexual relationship. When a man becomes infertile, women push him to get into polygamy in order to keep his marriage intact instead of divorcing. Additionally, the belief that women

should not give birth to a girl child is another common stereotype of women or society, and it highly contributes to female infanticide because some males would rather have only male children. Despite being against the law and a societal evil, female infanticide remains a widespread practice in many traditional societies, such as those in China, India, and Pakistan. So, the primary reason as to why polygamy is allowed is infertility and the absence of male child or children.

The results of polygamous unions have also been observed in various studies. Research shows that children & women in polygamous marriage face severe psychological issues and then social well-being is also impacted drastically. It is a well-known fact that in polygamous households, the prejudiced actions of the husbands and their uneven treatment towards their wives lead to a variety of mental health problems. These include unhealthy competition amongst wives, low marital satisfaction, distrust, jealousy, and a host of other mental health issues. Certain nations, such as India, Bangladesh, Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, Iran, and Iraq, permit a woman to put a disclaimer against polygamy in marriage agreements. But in Pakistan and Iran, only consent is required from the first wife, and need to show it in the court as proof for the second wife. This hallucination of digression above tends to critically expose the unconvinced thought that could not be mobilized through socially acceptable intellectual conventions of the twentieth century, generally felt towards the minority.

Research Questions

1. To know the chief cause behind the concept of more than one marriage of Muslim men.
2. To assess the result of the co-wives' relationship.
3. To identify the cultural view on polygamous marriage.
4. To assess the psychological impression on women in polygamous marriage.

Techniques:

Research design and sample

Using convenience sampling, a sample of eleven Bigamous women, ranging in age from 18 to 75, was drawn from the Hojai District of Assam, India. A qualitative approach was used to investigate the experiences of women in polygamous marriage. A detailed cum flexible interview was conducted with consent of the sample population. A variety of perspectives and ideas held by women regarding their experiences in polygamous family structures were recorded and interpreted with phenomenological analysis.

Assessment measure

To learn about the perspectives of women in polygamous marriage and their life experiences, the causes of polygamous marriage, and the tactics employed, an in-depth interviewing technique was employed along with probing questions derived from literature.

1. What made your husband (spouse) prefer a second or third marriage?
2. Explain the nature of your relationships with co-wives?

Analysis of Response and Information collected

This study aims to explore married women's experiences in polygamous marriages and how they adjust to this type of marital arrangement. The female members of polygamous households discussed their encounters with polygamy. A cluster of themes emerged from the verbatim transcription analysis of 11 cases of polygamous women, including infertility or having exclusively female children, husbands' love marriages, and familial pressure.

Reason behind Polygamous Marriage:

The first theme was derived from asking polygamous women the same question in the first place. The co-wives discussed their varied experiences and the reasons for their decision to consent to their husbands' second or third marriages.

The subsequent sub themes were present in these primary subject categories.:

1. Infertility or only female children:

- a. Mrs. X aged 47 years old at the time of interview. She had a boy and the first wife of her husband; their arranged union was pleasant according to her. Till 9 years of marriage, she couldn't get pregnant, her In-laws got her husband's second marriage done. She claimed that initially her husband objected. However, she persuaded him to go for second marriage. She thought that by making room for a co-wife, she would also be fortunate enough to become a mother. Translated from Silati (dialect of Assam) to English, she said, "God blessed me to have a child when I allowed my husband to marry a second wife."
- b. In another case of Mrs. Z, who was childless for 6 to 8 years. Mrs. Z was first wife and she eventually chose to accept a co-wife over divorce for some reason as that of Mrs. X. Mrs. Z did made every effort to persuade her husband not to marry someone else, but was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, she got along well with the second wife later on.
- c. Mrs. B, a woman who was her husband's third wife, was tending to a newborn. Her marriage to her spouse was based on love. Her first spouse passed away from illness, and she was divorced from her second husband due to infertility. After this incident, she was depressed to a great extent. Her third marriage provided her with both financial and emotional support at that time. "I don't think I was the one who couldn't have children," she remarked. It might have also been the man's issue because her first husband constantly called her a childless lady and cursed her.
- d. Mrs. H was the first wife with a love marriage and she had two female children in three years. Both babies were delivered through cesarean. Now she was not ready for the 3rd child. Her in-laws forced her husband to marry other women because of 2 girl children. They also threatened her with divorce. She stated, "I allowed a co-wife in my marriage because I didn't wish to have more children after my second child. I allowed and agreed to my husband's request for a co-wife to have more children." She also claimed that love with time declined and she preferred to accept a co-wife rather than divorce to save their marriage and secure her daughter's future.

Table 1: Reason behind husband entering into polygamous marriage

Response of Co-wives	Frequency
Failure to conceive a child	3
Failure to conceive a male child	4
Illness of 1 st wife	4
Total	11

Source: Primary Data

Fig. 1: Reason behind husband entering into polygamous marriage

2. The Results of Polygamous Marriages

A second main issue that emerged from analyzing co-wives' interactions was the results of polygamous marriages.

Adverse effects on co-wives

Jealousy: Oftentimes, jealousy is a reaction used to safeguard a relationship.

- a. When Mrs. S, a 36- year-old first wife, learned that her husband had a covert marriage to Miss J. She was terrified of losing her husband and was somewhat disturbed. She refused to let her husband remain in the same home as his second wife while she was living with her in-laws. "My husband was no longer trustworthy for me after that," the woman stated. She clarified, saying, my husband used to disregard my daughters and me and cut down on their monthly allowance. I was going through a trying and uncertain moment. Despite accepting her husband's second wife, Mrs. T stated, "This sharing was indeed hurting since, my husband got married to the second wife."
- b. Mrs. I, a 50-year-old working woman, shared a home with her two children and a spouse. Her marriage lasted for forty years. The first ten years of her marriage were spent living with her husband. She moved to a different household after her husband's second marriage, stating that "to me, it works best because I don't have to see her (co-wife) come into the house to visit my husband.",
"Out of sight, out of mind" was her statement, and she said she liked the living arrangement.
- c. Miss N was Mr. I second wife. She said, "The first wife of my husband always gets more privilege than me." She further argued, "my children and I should get a fair and deserving share of the marriage and properties". Being the second wife, Miss. N stated that following her second marriage, "there was constant bickering between the two us; our children did not get along, and I and the co-wife did not get along." "I would rather not go to the same social event or activity with my rival (co-wife)," the woman said. We hardly ever went to the same social function as our husband, unless it was really important or it was a family affair.

Feelings of unhappiness and loneliness:

- a. Mrs. G was not content in many aspects with her marriage. She explained that following her husband's second marriage, she was left all by herself with her girls. "There was a time when I felt like God was the only person in the world who was on my side," she remarked. Due to the infertility, Mrs. B, the second wife, and Mrs. K, the first wife, felt more alone and judged by their family, while the new wives gained greater social and financial privileges as a result of having children.
- b. In case of Mrs. A she shared that she had more privileges at first but as time went on and she became pregnant, she did not realize that there had been a period when her in-laws and then her husband had entirely disregarded her. "Emotions change with priorities," the respondent stated. Mrs. A was quite upset by her husband's second marriage because of her advanced age, but she eventually came to terms with it and enjoyed positive relationships with both the second wife and her kids.
- c. On Contrary Mrs. P stated that she was horrified to learn about her husband's extramarital affair. "Having another female in my husband's life was very shocking and tragic for me," the woman said. Even though Mrs. P persuaded her husband to have a second marriage, she admitted, "I used to cry in isolation." She also stated, "I was very much distressed and lonely after the second marriage of my husband."

Dividing up domestic duties

- a. Mrs. K, she came to terms on living with the co-wife of her husband. She remarked, “I used to take care of my child and co-wife’s as well”. “I never made differences among children,” she added in her explanation. “My husband’s second wife also assists me with everyday household tasks,” she remarked. Additionally, Mrs. K gets along well with her co-wife. People saw her relationship with her co-wife as sisterly. Mrs. K assisted in caring for her co-wife and her infant. She said, “We both share the housework and I always take care of her children”.
- b. According to Mrs. D added that even though the co-wives occasionally argue, they nevertheless support one another. She views minor conflicts between co - wives as a normal part and parcel of life. She mentioned that her husband’s first wife had cooked and brought food for her from the house when she was admitted to the hospital because she had a newborn. She claimed to have witnessed the delivery as well. Mrs. D, the third wife, claims that she gets along well with the other spouses and they share the same house. “My husband’s first wife works, so I used to handle the household chores,” Mrs. D stated. “We being realistic have accepted the co-wives”. She remarked, “At first, I wasn’t happy, but over time, and in keeping with reality, I’ve admitted it and divided the housework.” Although they did not get along, Mrs. I, first wife, and Miss N, her second wife, attended several significant occasions together.

The recently released report, titled “Status of Women in Polygamous Marriages and Need for Legal Protection,” was co-authored by BMMA’s Noorjehan Safia Niaz and Zakia Soman. BMMA is an organization that has been working on Muslim Family Law reforms since 2007. The survey was conducted over a year in 2017. After 289 questionnaires were distributed to a random sample of women in polygamous marriages across Delhi, Rajasthan, MP, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Odisha, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh, fifty case studies were gathered. According to a national study by Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA) released on 20 December 2022. Being in a polygamous marriage causes a great deal of emotional anguish to the woman. Of the 289 spouses surveyed, 84% said that polygamy should be illegal. The study notes that women “are in no position to raise their voice and demand fair and equal treatment” due to lack of education and financial means. Several of the interviewees expressed feeling betrayed, losing their dignity, and losing their self-respect when their husbands remarried while still their spouses.

POSITION OF POLYGAMY IN INDIA AS PER THE NATIONAL FAMILY HEALTH SURVEY REPORTS – 3, 4 AND 5.

The reasons of polygamy, revealed by the third National Family Health Survey (NFHS), carried out in 2006 will be dealt in this part of paper. In India the practice of polygamy has fallen to 2.55 percent in comparison to the census data of 1961 figures based on Census of India data then the proportion was 5.6.

The details of the NFHS are as follows:

1. Religion-wise Polygamy Percentage - The National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–20) found that 2.1% of Christians, 1.9% of Muslims, 1.3% of Hindus, and 1.6% of other religious groups were in polygamous marriage.
2. Reduction in polygamous marriages: Data from the NFHS-3 (2005–06), NFHS-4 (2015–16), and NFHS-5 (2019–20) were analyzed for a study by the International Institute of Population Sciences (IIPS) titled “Polygyny in India: Levels and Differentials.” It revealed that, overall, the

percentage of men married to multiple women at a time polygynous marriages had dropped from 1.9% in 2005–06 to 1.4% in 2019–20.

3. Highest incidence of polygamous marriage existed among the Scheduled Tribes: The rate of polygamy was 2.4% among STs, 1.5% among SCs, 1.3% among OBCs, and 1.2% among others, compared to the national average of 1.4% percent (NFHS-5).

4. High prevalence of polygamous marriages are found in the North Eastern states of India: The rates of polygynous marriages are especially high in East Jaintia Hills (20%), Kra Daadi (16.4%), West Jaintia Hills (14.5%), and West Khasi Hills (10.9%).

According to a study by the International Institute of Population Sciences (IIPS), the percentage of polygynous marriages in India was 1.4% in 2019–21 and continued to drop over time. Overall, it was discovered that the North-Eastern and Southern regions of India had greater rates of polygynous marriage. There have been reports of higher rates of polygyny in Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh, two states in Northeastern India. At the national level in India, the percentage of polygamous marriages between Muslims and Hindus differed by 0.6%. Overall, it was discovered that older, poorer, and illiterate women were more likely to be married in polygamous unions. It suggested that, in addition to geography and religion, socio-economic factors also affected this type of marriage.

If we sum up the data from the third National Family Health Survey - 3, which was conducted in 2006, the practice of polygamy has decreased to 2.55% of all marriages, compared to 5.6% in 1961, according to Census of India. Religion-specific Polygamy Rate - 2.1% of Christians, 1.9% of Muslims, 1.3% of Hindus, and 1.6% of other religious groups were polygamous, as per the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–20) report. The International Institute of Population Sciences (IIPS) released a study report indicating that the number of polygamous marriages in India was 1.4% in 2019–21 and was declining over time.

The foregoing discussion covers the legality of polygamy under Islamic law/territorial law and the prohibition of it in other religions. A brief discussion is also given on the practice's effects on Indian society. Although polygamy's constitutional validity has not been established, laws are always susceptible to change for the sake of society, and this practice may also change or be outlawed for other reasons, including the well-being of the populace. All the reports of the National Family Health Survey 3, 4, 5, and The *International Institute of Population Sciences (IIPS)* reports suggest that bigamy/polygamy is in decline mode.

On a lighter note, the study could draw that Polygamy, though a traditionally rooted custom, has undoubtedly declined significantly over the decades in India. The above findings from gathering data in IIPS and NFHS have proclaimed a shift in marital patterns, which indicates larger socio-cultural shifts.

Family structures and gender roles are significantly reconfigured as a result of shifting economic situations, advances in education, and changes in legislative frameworks that impact society norms. This change can be seen from the standpoint of cultural aspect as a component of a broader trend towards monogamy, which is consistent with modern, individualistic, and gender-equality principles.

Conclusion

The current analysis acts as a pilot study for future research on women in polygamous relationships by providing early data on this topic. The study's strength lies in its effort to find co-wives' coping mechanisms for handling these kinds of relationships in the Hojai District, Assam, India. There are, however, a few restrictions. Because this was a qualitative study, data collection was not done scientifically, and the results cannot be applied to any other group of women.

Differences in the participants' ages, years of marriage, levels of education, and religious beliefs may have had an impact on the data collection. The sample size may have been impacted by the sensitivity and comfort level of addressing polygamy. Out of 11 women only 3 consented to take part in the research. The conclusions of the paper suggests that most women regard polygamy to be an unpleasant and bitter pill to chew. Women faced emotional challenges ranging from loneliness and dissatisfaction to jealousy and lack of connection with their partners. The majority of these women claimed their husbands' infertility, a lack of social and financial support, and their dread of divorce as justifications for permitting co-wives in their unions.

The study also investigated about the benefits and tactics employed by women in polygamous marriage was a highly noteworthy aspect. The ramifications of these findings extend to policymakers and family advisors. Co-wives have developed effective solutions, but they need to be strengthened with adequate education and programming that teaches stress management and coping mechanisms. Education and self-affirmation are positive key to empower women. It is a tough effort to bring about change for women in a society & culture predominated by man. However, it is necessary thing to do.

The suggestions of the study include to raise community awareness about the harmful effect of polygamy on women through media campaigns. It is crucial to inform people who have the power to bring about change about the results of studies such as this one. It is important to inform policymakers about the negative effects that polygamous marriages have on the health and well-being of women. Women's psychological well-being should be given top priority since it is crucial to raise a stable, healthy family, especially in developing nations with few resources.

Therefore, psychological support by NGO's to be extended to a woman in polygamous marriage. In context with environment, polygamous marriages result in multiple wives, thus more number of children, thus, larger family sizes. All this will increase the population density leading to greater pressure on land use and denial of equitable access to natural resources. Moreover, polygamy also leads to land fragmentation as the lands is divided among all the children from all the wives. All this will lead to intensive use of smaller plots of land which can lead to soil depletion, loss of biodiversity and unsustainable agricultural practices. Moreover, polygamous family structure also raises broader questions of gender justice, sustainability and legal protection.

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