



# **The Role Of Male In Polyandrous Marriage: Economic, Psychological, And Cultural Dimensions – A Study Of Kinnaur District In Himachal Pradesh**

Dr.Antakshari, Jaivanti Devi

## **Abstract**

This study examines the role of males in polyandrous marriages in Tehsil- Moorang, District-Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh. On the basis of data collected from 20 co-husbands, used to explore their psychological relationships, economic cooperation, and cultural significance within this polyandrous marriage system. The Findings shows that polyandry supports shared livelihoods, preservation of land, strong cultural endorsement and generally low conflict. However, due to education and changing social values younger generations express challenges, signaling a potential shift away from the practice. The study highlights polyandry as a dynamic institution balancing tradition and modernity.

**Keywords:** Polyandry, Co-husbands, Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, Economic Cooperation, psychological dynamics, Cultural traditions, Fraternal polyandry.

## **1. Introduction**

Marriage, a universal social institution, takes diverse forms across human societies, reflecting the adaptability of cultural systems to economic, environmental, and social conditions. While monogamy remains the dominant marital form globally, polygamy continues to exist in various cultural and historical contexts. Within the spectrum of polygamy, polyandry, a sociologically significant system & an uncommon of marriage in which one woman has multiple husbands. Unlike polygyny, which reinforces patriarchal dominance, polyandry challenges normative ideas of kinship structures sexual access, gender roles, and fatherhood. In India, polyandry has historically existed in certain Himalayan regions such as Kinnaur, Sirmour (Himachal Pradesh) and parts of Uttarakhand. While these traditions are often attributed to land scarcity and ecological constraints, they also represent a unique gender dynamic deeply rooted in cultural systems. Among these, fraternal polyandry— is the most widely practiced form and continues, where a woman marries multiple brothers, albeit in declining numbers, in Kinnaur.

This study explores the role of the male in polyandrous marriages, with a focus on how co-husbands navigate, emotional relationships, kinship roles, economic responsibilities and social identity within a shared marriage. The study is grounded in review of existing anthropological and sociological theories & primary ethnographic data collected in Kinnaur.

Despite a numerous study & available literature on polyandry as a family or cultural system, there has been limited emphasis on the male experience in polyandrous marriage system. How do men express maleness in a marriage where sexual exclusivity is absent? How do economic responsibilities and inheritance standards shape inter-brother relationships? What emotional encounters or benefits emerge from shared marital arrangements? This study tries to answer these questions by examining:

- The economic basis and labor divisions among co-husbands.
- The psychological consequences of shared closeness and possible rivalry.
- The kinship and authority structures governing decision-making and tradition.
- The social observation and intergenerational transformation in the practice of polyandry.

By concentrating on male roles, this study adds a critical viewpoint to the understanding of polyandrous marriage as a gendered institution. It also offers insights into how traditional systems are being converted or redefined in the face of modernization, education, and ever-changing family values.

## **2. Review of Literature**

### **2.1. Financial /economical Scopes of Polyandry**

Polyandry in the Himalayan areas, predominantly in Kinnaur, has historically evolved as an adaptive response to ecological and economic constraints. Researchers argue that fraternal polyandry—where brothers share a single wife—helps prevent the division of family landholdings, which is crucial in mountainous landscapes with limited arable land (Parmar, 1975; Levine, 1988). This system permits families to preserve economic stability across generations, ensuring that land is not fragmented among multiple heirs. Furthermore, shared labor among co-husbands—often divided into local, farming, and trading responsibilities—boosts household efficiency (Gautam & Kshatriya, 2011).

### **2.2 Psychological and Household Significances**

From a psychological perspective, polyandrous households prove both cooperative and conflictual tendencies. While collective fatherhood and familial solidarity are emphasized—children often refer to all co-husbands as "fathers"—latent tensions may arise over intimacy, birth order, or decision-making (Levine, 1988). Gautam and Kshatriya (2011) found that such unions often rely on strong fraternal bonds and adherence to family hierarchy to maintain harmony. However, modernization and individual aspirations can destabilize this balance, especially among younger brothers who may feel restricted in such arrangements (Rao, 1993).

### **2.3 Social cultural, and Legal Explanations**

Customarily, polyandry is legitimized in Kinnaur through references to epic folklore, especially the story of Draupadi and the Pandavas in the Mahabharata. This story is often invoked to validate and sanctify the practice within local communities (Parmar, 1975; Singh, 2016). Additionally, tribal customary law—recognized under Indian jurisprudence for Scheduled Tribes—permits polyandry, even though it is not acknowledged under the broader Hindu Marriage Act (Chakraborty, 2018). Ceremonial roles of males in such marriages remain vital: they uphold family rituals, share responsibilities, and ensure ancestry continuity.

### **2.4 Modern Changes**

Recent studies show a weakening in polyandrous unions due to increasing access to education, movement, and exposure to urban values (Gautam & Kshatriya, 2011; Thakur, 2020). Younger generations in Kinnaur are more likely to favor nuclear families and monogamous marriages. Yet, some families continue to practice polyandry for economic suitability or cultural adherence, suggesting a transitional phase rather than complete disappearance. Climate change and shifting agricultural patterns—especially in apple farming—have further strained the traditional logic of shared labor, prompting re-evaluation of the practice (Rao, 1993).

### **2.5 Legal, Ritual, and Kinship Structures**

Local sacraments reflect collective marital status—for example, the bride ritualistically joins all brothers, marking one as the primary partner. Inheritance norms are tightly bound to the practice: a brother who opposes polyandry may lose all property rights and familial enclosure. Social paternity is conservative: all brothers may be considered fathers, with the eldest often known as the key person.

## 2.6. Transition, Decline, and Modern Pressures

A clear generational change is apparent. Younger Kinnauris increasingly reject polyandry, seeing it as obsolete and a blockade to personal freedom—particularly individual ambitions in education and career). Ethnographical observations also record erosion in common labour traditions—households now hire migrant labourers, reducing dependence on intra-familial cooperation. This replicates wider shifts in social organization and economic structures.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

### 3.1 Historical and Cultural Contextual of Polyandry

Polyandry has been known in various cultures, including amongst the Tibetans, Toda of South India, and some African and Amazonian tribes. However, its sociocultural persistence in the Himalayan region, specifically in Kinnaur, is closely tied to ecological and economic situations. Ethnographic research by Goldstein (1971) in Tibet and Levine (1988) in Nepal opinions to land shortage, resource conservation, and labor pooling as critical reasons behind the institutionalization of fraternal polyandry. In Kinnaur, fraternal polyandry historically helped to prevent land division, maintain patrilineal continuousness, and safeguard economic stability of the household. Rather than dividing property among sons, all brothers shared a wife and inherited land conjointly, creating a unified family unit. However, the male roles within such systems are shaped not only by real-world concerns but also by complex gendered prospects and social norms.

### 3.2 Gender Roles and Male Identity in Polyandry

While early anthropologists focused on kinship structures and reproductive approaches, more recent study underlines the gendered dimensions of polyandry. According to Haddix McKay (2003), male roles in polyandrous households vary by birth order, with elder brothers often assuming leadership roles and younger brothers adopting more subordinate positions. These hierarchies affect access to decision-making, emotional closeness with the wife, and even authority over kids. Masculinity in polyandrous marriages is not monolithic. For example, Starkweather and Hames (2012), in their cross-cultural study of polyandrous systems, found that shared fatherhood and cooperative masculinity often substituted patriarchal dominance. In contrast, in non-fraternal polyandry or falling systems, rivalry, suspicion, and identity crises are more distinct. There is also the question of how emotional and sexual intimacy is conveyed between co-husbands. Goldstein (1987) observed that sexual access is often rotated or left informal but bank on heavily on cultural norms of trust and cooperation. Violations of these norms—whether apparent favoritism or clandestine intimacy—can lead to strains.

### 3.3 Economic and Kinship Theories

Several theoretical contexts help describe the persistence and structure of polyandry:

**A. Resource-Based Theories:** These suggest that polyandry is an adaptation to economic restrictions, particularly in high-altitude or arid environments. Sharing a wife permits for labor pooling and unified land ownership, stopping partition of agricultural assets (Crook & Crook, 1994). This theory is central to explaining fraternal polyandry in Himalayan societies.

**B. Structural Functionalism:** This perception views polyandry as helping the function of family stability. By upholding household integrity through a single marital unit, societies ensure procreative success, property security, and intergenerational continuity (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952).

**C. Alliance Theory:** Lévi-Strauss's alliance theory infers marriage as a form of mutual exchange. Though traditionally applied to exogamous arrangements, in polyandry, it may explain how families preserve internal alliances between siblings to preserve land and lineage.

**D. Psychological & Gender Theories:** Feminist and psychological theories offer insight into how polyandry redefines masculine roles, often requiring men to renegotiate character, repress individual want, and perform cooperation rather than dominance (Boserup, 1989; Bennett, 1983).

**3.4 Polyandry in Modern India:** Recent studies (e.g., Singh, 2021) document the decline of polyandry in places like Kinnaur due to i.e Modern education and exposure to individualistic values, Legal systems that don't recognize multiple husbands, Youth relocation and preference for nuclear families. Men in such transitioning situations often find themselves uncertain between cultural responsibility and personal objective, leading to identity problems and generational struggles.

#### 4. Research Gap

While much is acknowledged about why polyandry occurs and how families function within it, male experiences keep on underexplored. Few studies have taken the first-person voices of co-husbands, their emotive worlds, or their insights of gender, intimacy, and collaboration. This study plugs that gap by offering primary qualitative statistics on the subjective roles of men in polyandrous nuptials in Kinnaur.

#### 5. Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to explore and analyse the role of the male in polyandrous marriage systems in the Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, focusing on psychological, economic, and cultural dimensions. Specifically, the study tries to find to:

- i) Study the economic roles and responsibilities of male partners in polyandrous families, including labor distribution, fiscal management and land inheritance.
- ii) Understand the psychological experiences of co-husbands, including identity creation, emotional well-being within common nuptial relationships and interpersonal dynamics.
- iii) Analyse the traditional and cultural that legitimize and withstand polyandrous practices, with stress on mythological stories, social customs, and customary laws.
- iv) Evaluate the bearing of modernization, education, and socio-economic transformation on male contribution and attitudes toward polyandry in present-day Kinnaur society.
- v) Contribute to sociological and anthropological understanding of gender roles and family structures in high-altitude, resource-constrained tribal societies.

#### 6. Methodology

##### 6.1 Research Design

In the instant study exploratory and qualitative-dominant research design with additional quantitative elements, have been adopted. The design is grounded in the need to understand economic roles, social behaviour, interactive dynamics, and cultural meanings from the lived experiences of male members in fraternal polyandrous nuptials. The deep-rooted traditional context of polyandry in Kinnaur, the study arranges ethnographic involvement and narrative explanation, while also including designed data collection to support comparative study.

##### 6.2 Study Area – Moorang Tehsil, Kinnaur.

Moorang Tehsil at an average elevation of 2,500–3,000 meters, lies along the Sutlej River basin. Agriculture (apple orchards, barley, peas) and pastoralism remain main occupations. Social organization is still profoundly influenced by fraternity structures, kinship traditions, and customary law. The respondent of three **villages of Lippla, Jangi, and Rarang** situated in **Moorang Tehsil of Kinnaur district**, Himachal Pradesh, was contacted. This region was selected for the following reasons:

- It represents a stronghold of **polyandrous practices** in the region.
- The resident population retains **traditional socio-economic arrangements** based on land-centred livelihoods.

- Suitability for extended village-based data collection, including **respondent observation**, was viable.

### 6.3 Sampling Technique.

In the instant study snowball **sampling** and purposive technique was employed. In **purposive sampling**, families where fraternal polyandry is presently experienced or has been practiced in the last generation were specifically selected. And in **snowball sampling**, after initial respondents were known through resident leaders, additional co-husbands were mentioned by community members. This method was vital due to the **sensitive nature** of the subject and the need to build trust in **integrated communities**.

### 6.4 Sample Size

A total of **20 co-husbands (males in fraternal polyandrous unions)** participated in the study:

Village	No. of Co-Husbands Interviewed
Rarang	8
Lippa	5
Jangi	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>

### 6.5 Method of Data Collection

A **multi-method approach** was used to triangulate information and capture both quantitative and qualitative dimensions:

#### a) Structured Questionnaire

- Administered to all 20 co-husbands
- Emphasis areas:
  - Economic roles.
  - Family decision-making
  - Conflict resolution mechanisms
  - Opinions on transformation and family structure

#### b) Semi-Structured Interviews

- Open-ended questions on:
  - Emotional experience in common marriage
  - Familial relationships and hierarchy
  - Insights of impartiality and intimacy
  - Linking to mythology, custom, and religion

#### c) Respondent Opinion

- Observed sacraments, daily practices, household relations
- Kept comprehensive field notes and reflexive journal



### 6.5. Demographic Profile of Respondents;

The demographic profile of the respondents is created on basis of two parameter i.e Age & Education. The responses of the respondents gathered during the study are presented in tabular form as under:

Variable	Category	Frequency (N=20)	Percentage (%)
Age	30–40 years	6	30%
	41–50 years	9	45%
	51+ years	5	25%
Education	No formal education	7	35%
	Primary/Middle	9	45%
	Higher Secondary+	4	20%

A majority of respondents (70%) are 41 years or above, signifying that polyandry is more persistent among older generations. The younger group (30–40) is more likely to challenge or unlock from the system. Education relates inversely with commitment to polyandry. All four respondents with higher education levels spoken doubt or disapproval of continuing polyandrous practice. Respondents with no formal education were most likely to view polyandry as customarily sacred, while those with secondary+ education labelled it as practical, restrictive, or old-fashioned.

### 6.7 Economic Dimension

**A.** Occupational Roles; the responses of the respondents on their occupation roles gathered during the study are presented in tabular form and analysed as under:

Occupation	Frequency	% of Total
Apple farming	8	40%
Livestock (secondary)	5	25%
Wage labor (seasonal)	2	10%
Government/private jobs	2	10%
Small trade/shopkeeping	3	15%

It is observed that Apple farming is the economic support for nearly all respondents. Secondary livelihood divergence (e.g. cattle, daily wage labour) allows brothers to curtail overlap and make the most of family income. In families with three co-husbands, division is often like eldest brother engaged in Agriculture, 2<sup>nd</sup> one engaged with livestock, and others are engaged employment. In Rarang, where horticulture is more lucrative, younger members were more likely to stay and share land responsibility.

**B.** Perceived Fairness of Influence; the responses of the respondents gathered during the study are presented in tabular form and analysed as under:

Perceived Fairness	Frequency	%
All contribute equally	12	60%
Eldest contributes more	5	25%
Youngest contributes more	3	15%

In cases where a co-husband migrates for income, tensions arise due to apparent income inequity, despite rotating access to conjugal rights and land. Monetary transparency fluctuates, some families pool all income; others divide income in equal shares.

## 6.8 Psychological & Interpersonal Dynamics

A. Conflict Frequency; the responses of the respondents gathered during the study are presented in tabular form and analysed as under:

Frequency of Conflict	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Rare (less than once a year)	12	60%
Occasional (1–2 times/year)	5	25%
Frequent (monthly or more)	3	15%

From the data available in above table it is apparent that there is very low frequency only 15% of the respondents who responded that they are having frequent conflict among brothers. The emotional tensions often go silent or eased by elders. Revolving conjugal access arrangement is the most effective instrument for handling jealousy. Families with recurrent conflict often lack clear systems for sharing labor and intimacy.

B. Emotional Satisfaction in Shared Marriage. The responses of the respondents gathered during the study are presented in tabular form and analysed as under:

Emotional State	Frequency	%
Satisfied	11	55%
Mixed feelings	6	30%
Dissatisfied	3	15%

It was observed during the study that the emotional displeasure & discontent was higher among younger brothers, often tied to absence of their role in decision-making, apparent favouritism in marital matters and their desire for exclusive romantic bonds. Emotional gratification did not strongly associate with income, but did correlate with how disagreements are determined and whether roles are clearly negotiated within the family.

## 6.9 Cultural Identity & Ritual Participation

A. Belief in Cultural Legality of Polyandry. The responses of the respondents gathered during the study are presented in tabular form and analysed as under:

View	Respondents	%
Sacred tradition (myth-based)	10	50%
Practical (land preservation)	7	35%
Outdated / unjust	3	15%

It was observed during the study that 50 % respondents above 51 years strongly supported the sacred validity, whereas all dissidents were below 40 years. 15% of respondents are of the view that polyandry is outdated and unjust.

**B.** Ritual and Festival Involvement. The responses of the respondents gathered during the study are presented in tabular form and analysed as under:

Participation Level	Respondents	%
Full/regular	15	75%
Occasional	4	20%
Rare	1	5%

It was observed during the study that 75 % respondents are regular/fully participated in local rituals i.e losar, phulaich, death, marriage etc rituals reinforces male bonding and public acknowledgement of polyandrous roles. 5% of respondents are express their views that they rarely participated in local rituals.

**6.10** Future Outlook on Polyandry; The responses of the respondents gathered during the study are presented in tabular form and analysed as under;

Perceived Future	Respondents	%
Polyandry will continue	9	45%
Likely to decline within 1–2 generations	8	40%
Unsure	3	15%

It was observed during the study that 45% of the respondent co-husbands are more expectant about continuance of polyandry. Younger men see individual freedom and urban chances as more desirable. All three dissenters thought they would not want their children to follow age old tradition.

**7.** Beside the quantitative analysis of data or information gathered, in Case of one co- husband, details analysis of the experience, expectations and suggestion were recorded as under;

**Case Study:** Dawa Negi and Sonam Negi – Brothers from Jangi Village are brothers who are presently in a fraternal polyandrous nuptial with a single wife, Tenzin (64 and live in a shared household with their elderly parents and four children. Their marriage was decided by their family in 1984 in accordance with local customs, rooted in the belief that fraternal polyandry conserves inherited land holdings and reduces disagreements over inheritance. Dawa Negi, the elder, is the primary agricultural worker. Dawa Negi manages apple orchards and barley plots. Sonam Negi is engaged as a wooden carpenter, working in Rampur. He contributes to household cash income and occasionally carries consumer belongings from Rampur. This division of labor benefits balance the financial demands of a large, joint family. Both brothers contribute equally to shared expenditures, including education and healthcare. Dawa spoken about a sense of responsibility and silent management. “Being the elder brother, I take main decisions, but I never supersede Sonam’s view.” Sonam reflected on the emotional challenges. “At first, it was weird sharing a spouse. But over period, we learned to respect each other’s chance. We don’t fight—we alternate weekly. If there’s jealousy, we stay silent.”

Both Dawa & Sonam mentioned the Pandavas-Draupadi saga as a foundational story that legitimized their nuptial. “If it was good enough for the Pandavas, it’s good enough for us.” ‘Ranzang’ an ancestral offering is made together, strengthening family unity and shared identity. **Dawa cares the custom and believes it is essential to survival in a land-scarce region. Sonam is more unsure, “Maybe in the next generation, children will want separate spouses. I see how lifecycle is changing in towns.”**



## 8. Limitations

The instant study suggests noteworthy insights into polyandry in Kinnaur, several limitations must be acknowledged. The study focused on 20 co-husbands across three villages in Moorang Tehsil. While this provides valuable restricted understanding, the sample size limits the generalizability of findings to the wider Kinnaur district. The study primarily cantered on the role of men. The viewpoints of spouses and other feminine members, which could provide a more all-inclusive understanding of family dynamics, were not deeply explored.

Data on conflict rate, emotional fulfilment, and financial involvement rely on self-reporting, which can be influenced by social allure bias, especially in sensitive cultural contexts. The psychological analysis was limited by the use of structured questionnaires; deeper qualitative methods like psychoanalytic interviews could reveal richer emotional complexities.

## 9. Conclusion

This study discovered the psychological, economic and cultural dimensions of the role of males in fraternal polyandrous nuptials in Moorang Tehsil, Kinnaur. The findings prove that polyandry is a multifaceted social institute deeply rooted in local culture, primarily continued by economic pragmatism and cultural tradition. Economically, co-husbands function as a supportive labour unit, sharing responsibilities in agriculture, livestock, wage labour and rearing. This collective approach ensures best use of scarce land resources and defends family wealth from disintegration. The data exposed a majority insight of fair monetary contribution and separation of labour, although variances exist when some brothers occupy in external wage labour. The majority of co-husbands stated emotional fulfilment and low struggle, an important minority—particularly younger brothers—spoken discontent related to limited personal independence, conjugal jealousy, and hierarchical decision-making. Conflict, is often determined through cultural norms of negotiation and rotation of conjugal rights. Culturally, polyandry is understood by several as a sacred tradition, reinforced by local mythologies like the Pandavas-Draupadi legend and strengthen through community rituals. This cultural legitimization provides a framework that upholds social accord and identity. However, a prominent generational shift was observed, younger men, exposed to education and urban effects, are gradually questioning the system and showing preference for monogamy and nuclear family structures. The future of polyandry in Kinnaur thus appears uncertain but evolving. While older generations advocate for its preservation as a social and economic necessity, younger generations indicate a potential decline due to changing aspirations, education, and migration. In sum, the role of the male in polyandrous nuptials in this region is multi-layered—encompassing cooperative economic approaches, multifaceted interpersonal dynamics, and inherent cultural implication. The sustainability of this institution will depend on how it adjusts to modern socio-economic changes while preserving cultural legacy.

## References

- Bhasin, V. (2003). *Anthropology of family and kinship*. Rawat Publications.
- Goldstein, M. C. (1994). *Polyandry and population growth in a Tibetan society*. University of Michigan Press.
- Gupta, D., & Sharma, A. K. (2010). Socio-cultural dimensions of polyandry among Himalayan communities. *Journal of Himalayan Studies*, 7(2), 45–62.
- Jamir, C. T. (2017). Economic strategies and family systems in the Kinnaur district. *Indian Journal of Social Research*, 58(3), 283–298.
- Mair, L. (1971). Polyandry and social structure among the Tibetans. *Ethnology*, 10(2), 123–137.
- Rana, R. S. (2001). Family structure and cultural practices in Himachal Pradesh. *Journal of Cultural Anthropology*, 9(1), 18–34.
- Singh, K., & Sharma, R. (2014). The role of co-husbands in polyandrous marriages: A case study from Himachal Pradesh. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(1), 58–74.
- Winkler, D. (2014). Polyandry and kinship in the Himalayas: An anthropological overview. *Himalayan Research Bulletin*, 33(1), 12–29.