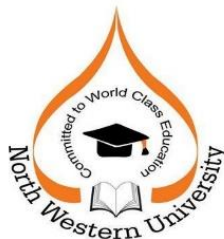


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Marriage

Introduction:

The institution of marriage, quite like that of the family, is universal. There cannot be a family without marriage. Thomas Hylland Eriksen very rightly says that marriage is essential for human survival. Women are important because it is they who procreate children; men do not. Similarly, women cannot procreate without alliance with men. The observations made by Eriksen needs to be quoted here:

Seen from the male point of view women are a scarce resource. No matter how male-dominated a society is, men need women to ensure its survival. In matrilineal systems, the men's sisters do this; in patrilineal societies, their wives do it; or in cognatic or bilateral societies, sisters and wives each do part of the job. A man can have a nearly unlimited number of children everyday while a women's capacity is limited to one child per year, and moreover, in many societies many children die before they grow up.

Whatever may be the rituals related to marriage, it remains an alliance. This alliance can be for a lifetime or it may be short-lived. But in all situations there are some alliance, some understanding, and some sharing between those who give their daughter or receive a bride. In Indian society we find several marriage alliances established for several purposes between royal families. In medieval India a treaty was signed or peace was bought by entering into a marriage. The Rajputs gave their daughters in marriage to the Mughals. Marriage therefore is an exchange of male and female, it is an alliance, a contract.

Definitions of Marriage:

A number of anthropologists have struggled to formulate a definition of marriage that would apply to all human societies. Eriksen has made an attempt to define marriage. He observes:

Whether or not persons choose their spouses, marriage is very commonly perceived as a relationship between groups, not primarily between individuals.

Eriksen conducts a stock-taking of the ethnographic atlas of world communities and finds that spouses are chosen between groups, clans and communities. It is more a concern of the group and very little of the individuals. His survey shows polyandry occurs only four times. It is a rare kind of marriage. So is the case of polygyny. “Comparatively speaking romantic love is rarely seen as an important precondition for a good marriage. Rather marriage is frequently arranged by kin groups, not by the individual concerned.” Eriksen further argues that the marriage institution almost in all the cases is a concern not of individuals but of groups. If Eriksen is taken seriously, it could safely be said that though marriage binds two individuals, it also binds a large number of kin groups in alliance. We not only accept our daughter-in-law but also accept other marital kins. In Village India, Iravati Karve informs that the daughter-in-law of a family traditionally becomes the daughter-in-law of the whole village. She is obliged to observe purdah when she is at public places. And when son-in-law comes to his wife’s village, the women

observe purdah. Thus, marriage in India binds a man not only with the kin of the inlaws, but also with the whole caste and the village.

Westermarck is an authority on marriage. His three volume work on the history of marriage is an in-depth study of the subject. It has been abridged in a single volume entitled *A short History of Human Marriage*. He devotes considerable space to Hindu marriage, and it is in this respect his definition of marriage assumes importance. He writes:

Marriage is a relation of one or more men and women which is recognized by the custom or law and involves certain rights and duties both in the case of the parties entering the union and in the case of children born of it.

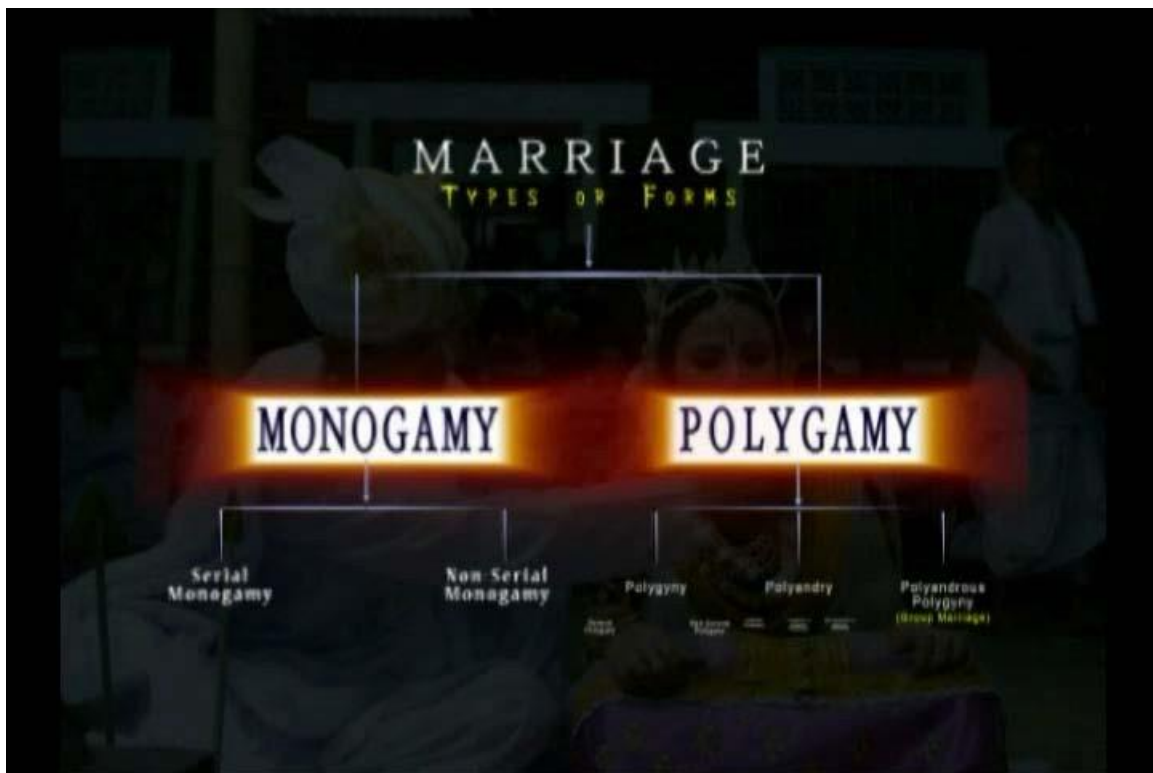
What is important in Westermarck's definition is that marriage permits sex relations between husband and wife, and these sex relations are legitimized by the society. It is because of this legitimization that marriage undergoes certain rituals which are performed publicly. Secondly, the objective of marriage is to bear children. The upbringing of children is also the responsibility of a family. From all considerations marriage is an institution which regulates sex relations and condemns promiscuity.

Yet another definition of marriage is given by D.N. Majumdar and T.N. Madan in their book *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*. They write:

Marriage ensures a biological satisfaction (that of sex) and a psychological satisfaction (that of having children) on individual plane, and on the wider collective plane, it ensures a two-fold survival, that of the group and its culture.

The definition given by Majumdar and Madan stresses the importance of (i) sex (ii) children and (iii) survival of the children at large. The meaning of marriage comes close to the concept of marriage propounded by the Hindu Shastras. P.N. Prabhu who dwells elaborately on Hindu social institutions says that marriage among Hindus is for (i) Dharma (ii) Procreation and (iii) Rati, (sex). It is the duty of a Hindu to enter into marriage because there is no salvation without marriage. Secondly, a man and woman should bear children and finally it is for sex. Hindu Shastrakaras, however, give precedence to religion over procreation and sex.

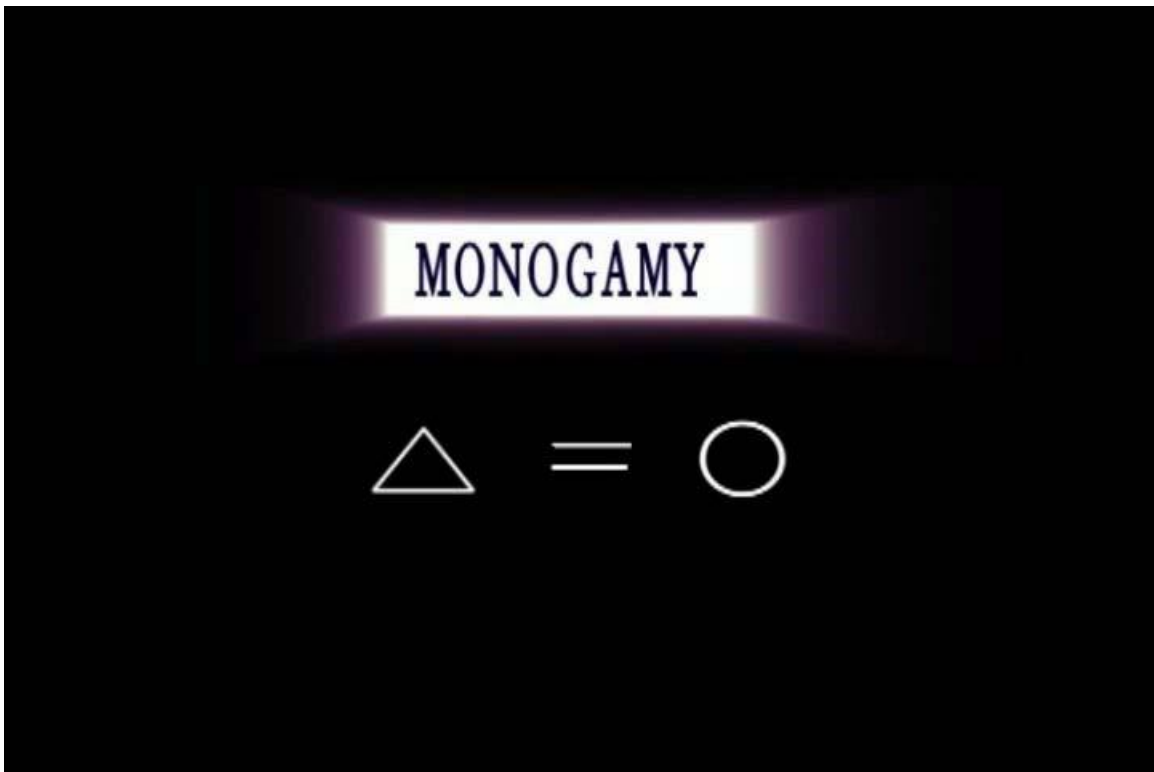
Forms of Marriage



All persons normally do not get married. Monogamy appears to be a natural form of marriage. But a person could choose his mate through

other forms of marriage also, namely polygyny and polyandry. Anthropologists have widely discussed the forms of marriage. Sometimes, it is termed as acquiring a mate. These forms of marriage are: (i) Monogamy and (ii) Polygamy. Polygamy is further divided into (a) Polygyny and (b) Polyandry. Some anthropologists have also found traces of group marriage. But this form of marriage is fast on the way to extinction. We shall discuss the forms of marriage as found in different societies.

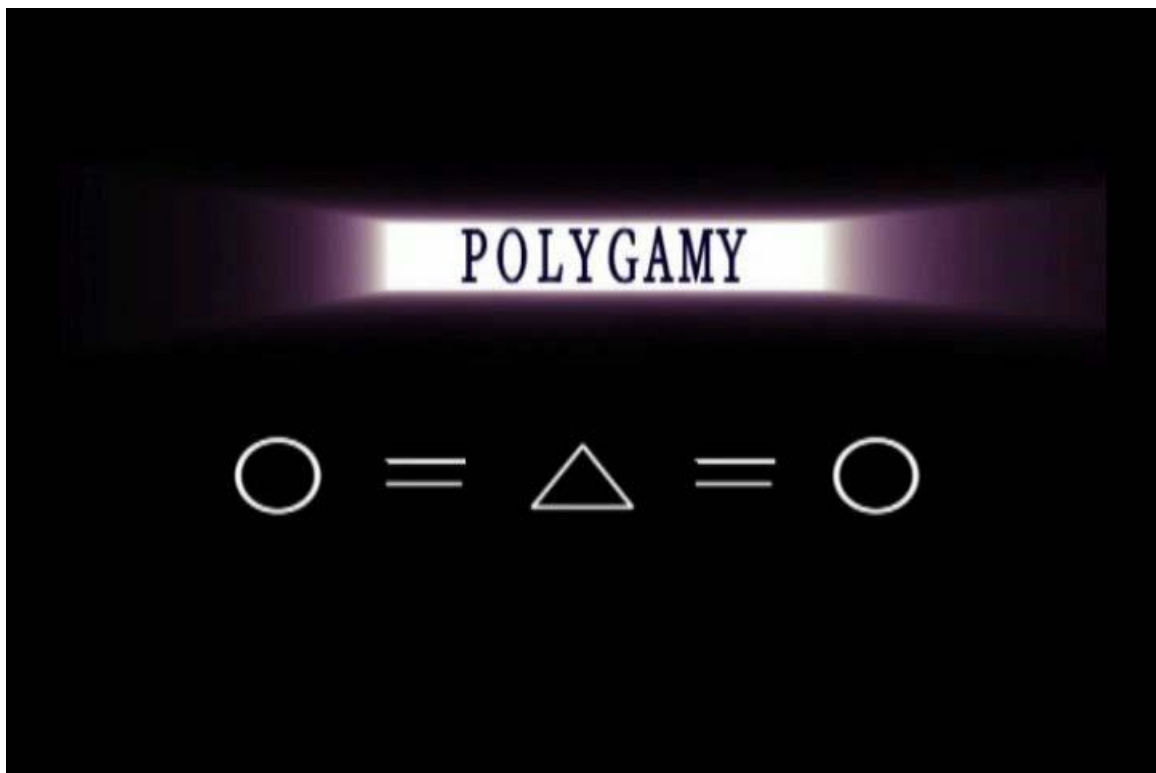
Monogamy



Under monogamy one man marries one woman. Monogamy seems to be the earliest form of marriage though its evolution has been controversial. Some argues that in the earlier periods of history there was promiscuity followed by matriarchal and patriarchal forms of

marriage. But there is also enough evidence to suggest that before the emergence of agriculture, people of subsistence economy had monogamous marriage. If we do not enter into the debate and look at the present popular form of marriage, it could be safely said that all over the world monogamy is the most favourite form of marriage. Even those who practice polygamy-polygyny and polyandry are returning to monogamy. The tribals in India are also abandoning polygyny. The classical Hindu joint family is also getting weak in the present context of globalization. If democracy has become a standard mode of government, monogamy has become a standard form of marriage all over the world. In all cases, it consists of husband, wife and unmarried children. According to Malinowski, “Monogamy has been and will remain the only true type of marriage”

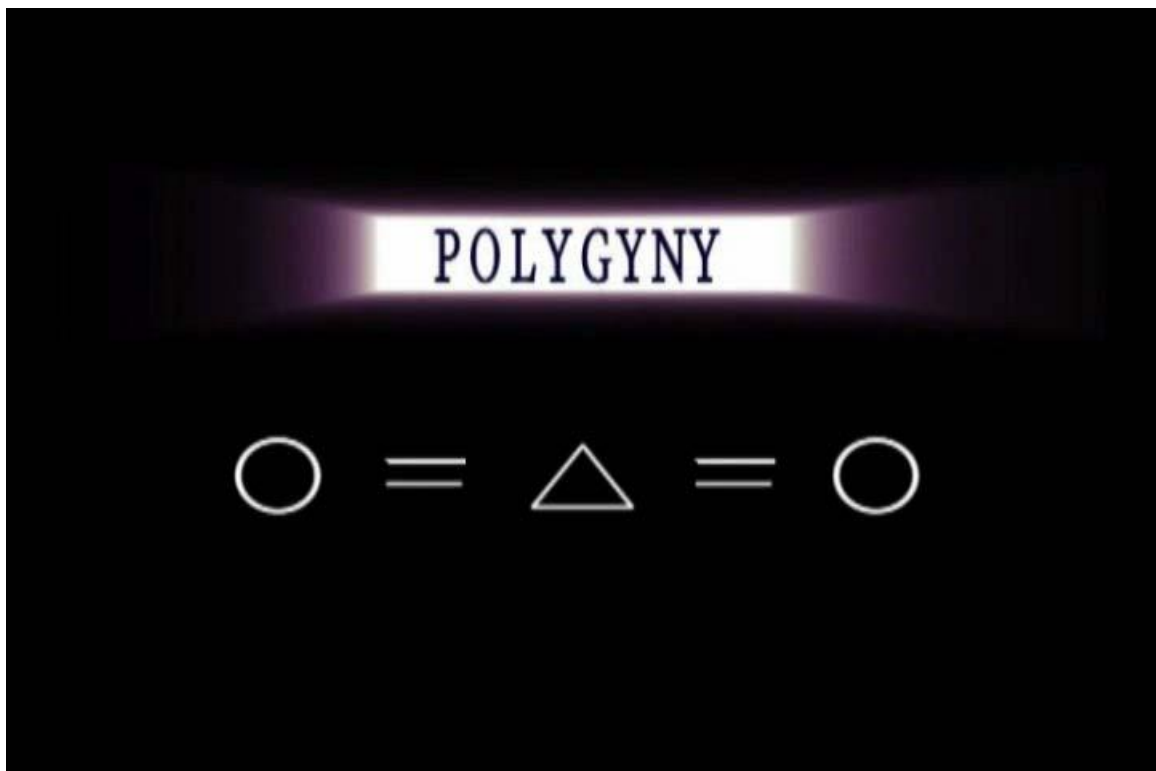
Polygamy



Though popularly polygamy is understood to mean marriage with two or more wives, it properly designates marriage of either a man or woman with more than one mate. What is commonly reckoned as polygamy is accurately called polygyny, the complementary institution being polyandry. In addition, it must be considered as the union of a group of men with a group of women – a custom known as ‘group marriage’.

Polygamy is further divided sub-divided into polygyny and polyandry.

Polygyny



Under this system one man has two or more wives at a time. Polygyny is generally called polygamy but strictly speaking the latter is a general term including both polyandry and polygyny.

Robert H. Lowie has written authoritatively on primitive society. His book *Primitive Society* is considered to be the second important work after Morgan's *Ancient Society*. While working among tribals, Lowie has found out and recorded several cases of polygyny. Introducing this form of marriage, Lowie observes:

Polygyny is one of those dangerous catch-words that required careful scrutiny lest there result a total misunderstanding of the conditions it is meant to characterize. In every human society, the number of male and of female individuals born is approximately equal. Hence, in order to have either polygyny or polyandry as a fairly common practice, it is obviously necessary that some non-biological factor should disturb the natural ratio.

Lowie has put his argument in a very logical way. He says that nature has ordained human procreation in such a way that the ratio of males and females in a society remains more or less equal. In such a situation, polygyny and polyandry is not created by nature or due to biological reasons. They are the cultural constructs made by the society. If some people keep more than one wife, some others have to go without a wife. Similarly, if the natural equilibrium of malefemale ratio is disturbed, there would be two or men to share one wife. Lowie argues that except monogamy, all other forms of marriage are socially and culturally constructed.

The question is why polygyny? The answer to this question can be sought with reference to history. In simple food-gathering economies polygyny was rare, though it was permissible. Since the sexes were of equal status it was not often that a woman wanted

another wife in her home. Occasionally however, she asked her husband to take another wife, or she acceded to his wish for another.

Lowie critically examines the available empirical evidences. He says that the practice of polygyny is found among the Eskimos. Eskimos works as hunters of fish in the Arctic sea. The life of the fishermen is quite risky. This reduces the male population. Thus polygyny became arithmetically possible among them. This form of marriage is also found in many parts of Africa.

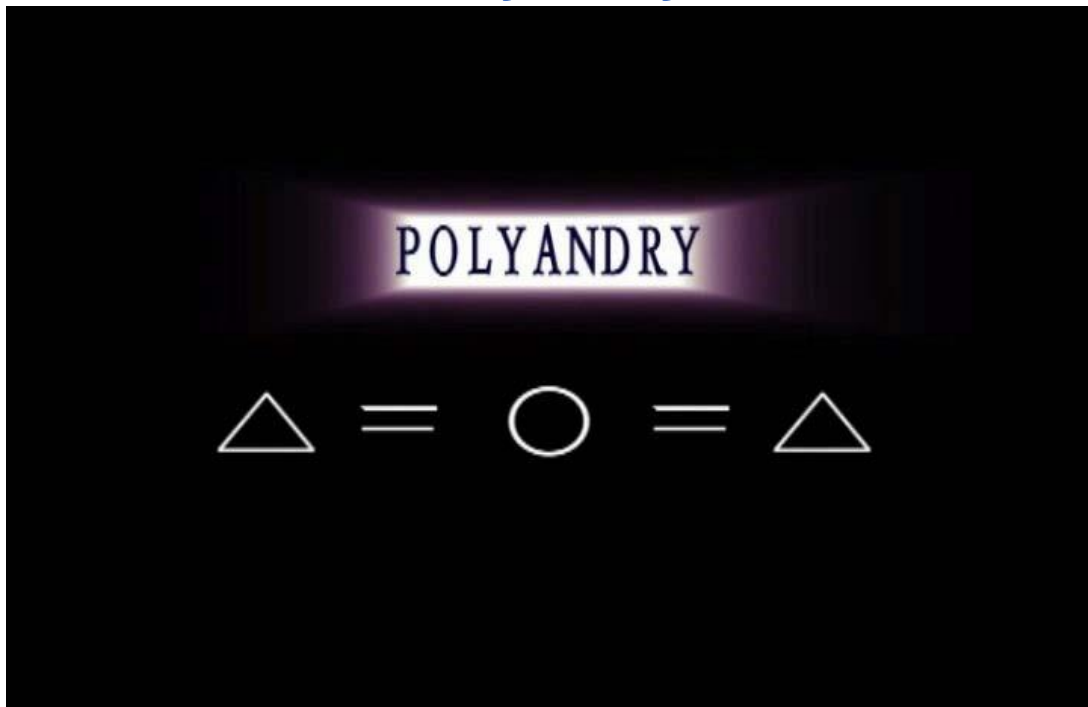
Considering all the empirical data that are available from the tribal societies, it could be concluded that polygyny is practiced only among the wealthier classes whose male can afford to buy multiple wives. These societies, mostly agricultural were wealthy enough to permit the nobles or monarchs to exceed by far the maximum of five wives found in African tribes. It is said that some of the African monarchs have been reported to have hundreds of wives.

The Indian scene is not very different from that of Africa. Here too, tribal groups also practice polygyny. It is a different thing that in the wake of development and modernization polygyny among them is increasingly decreasing. The monarchs or rulers in our country also had bands of wives in their palaces. In Hindu mythology, Darsharath of Ramayana had three wives. The rulers of the princely states also had a rich tradition of polygyny. Very clearly polygyny has been the true idiom of the rich class. It was assumed that polygyny gives status to a man.

Today, however, polygyny is on the way to extinction. It must also be observed that its emergence is not due to biological reasons. In all situations it is a form of marriage which is constructed by society. However, it should be made clear that even a tribal community,

which is theoretically polygynous, majority of members, do not practice polygyny. It is empirically the privilege of very few.

Polyandry



Admittedly, the practice of polyandry has been rare. Claims for its presence suggest that less than 1% of the people of the world's tribes or other practically independent units have permitted it. Moreover, where polyandry is permitted only some of the families were polyandrous where the majority of the persons in such societies lived in monogamous or polygynous family. This form of marriage allows a woman to have many husbands.

John Lewis had provided a definition of polyandry. He says "It is a marriage in which a woman can have more than one husband at the same time". Polyandry has been found in small number of societies. It has been reported in simple food-gathering societies, for example among the Wahuma tribals of East Africa and among the tribal

groups of Tibet and Toda (South India). Among the Wahumas polyandry is an altogether unique phenomenon. Though it is legitimate to practice polyandry, it is not a dominant institution among them. When a man is too poor to buy a wife alone, he is assisted by his brothers, and they share the marital rights until the woman's pregnancy when they become his exclusive prerogative.

There is a wide prevalence of polyandry among the Todas of Nilgiris. We have some data to indicate that in the past, the tribe had marked excess of men over women, coupled with the practice of female infanticide. But this custom has been abandoned and now there is a progressive diminution of male preponderance.

Among the Todas, when a man marries a woman it is understood that she automatically becomes the wife of his brothers, who normally live together. Even a brother born afterwards will be regarded as sharing his elder brother's rights. In such cases of fraternal polyandry no dispute ever arises among the husbands, and the very notion of such a possibility is flouted by the Toda mind. When the wife becomes pregnant, the eldest of the husbands performs a ceremony with a bow and arrow by which legal fatherhood is conventionally established in this tribe, but all the brothers are reckoned to be the child's fathers. The situation becomes more complicated when a woman weds several men who are not brothers and who as may happen, live in different villages. This is non-fraternal polyandry. When the husbands are scattered over several villages, the wife usually lives for a month with each in turn, though there is no absolute rule. In such cases, the determination of fatherhood in a legal sense is extremely interesting. For all social purposes that husband who performs the bow and arrow ceremony during the wife's pregnancy establishes his status as father of not only the first child but of any children born subsequently until one of the husbands perform the requisite rite.

Usually it is agreed that the first two or three children shall belong to the first husband, that at later pregnancy another shall establish paternal rights and so forth.

R.H. Lowie in 1921 took an account of the statistics regarding the incidence of polyandry among the Todas. His conclusions are found relevant even today. He observes:

What the Todas have done is to cling to polyandry and to temper it with polygyny, where formerly three brothers shared a single woman, they now tend to share two.

Group marriage



Another form of marriage called ‘group marriage’ is also mentioned in the study of primitive marriage systems. The empirical data generated by social anthropologists hardly provide any detail about this form of marriage. Lowie says that the term ‘marriage’ as we understand it by customary definition if applied, there is “hardly

something of the kind of group marriage”. He says what we actually term ‘group marriage’ is actually sexual communism. In each society, besides the tradition of monogamy, polygyny and polyandry, there are instances of pre-marital and extra-marital sex relations. These sex relations could be loosely called group marriage.

Lowie argues at length referring to a large number of social anthropologists, particularly Rivers, Morgan and others that there has never been a form of marriage called group marriage. He denies the existence of sexual communism in any part of the world.

Thus on the basis of the inferences drawn by Lowie and others, it can be said that the popular textbooks of social anthropology are wrong to refer to group marriage as a form of marriage. It has also been stated, in categorical terms, that there has never been and nowhere is there any incidence of group marriage among Indian tribes. Despite prevalence of polygyny and polyandry in parts of Africa and India, the general form of marriage all over the world remains to be monogamy which has come to stay for all times to come.

Conclusion:

Marriage is not a personal affair. It is not just an institution for the fulfillment of biological needs. It is a social alliance par excellence. Whatever maybe the kind of society, it has same inbuilt mechanism for providing legitimacy to the sexual needs. However, the functions that marriage institution performs have different priorities in different societies.

The End