

Note

Traditional Marriage Customs in Tribal Himachal, NW Himalaya, India

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Marriage is certainly an important event in the life of any individual, which every human being would invariably welcome. People living in tribal Himachal present different and interesting types of marriages and rites and rituals associated with it. This article depicts some interesting facts about the marriage customs of tribal areas of Himachal Pradesh.

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A complete idea about the nature of the people, their habits, traits and identity can be acquired only from cultural history of the inhabitants. The life and outlook of people of Himachal Pradesh are largely conditioned by its climate, flora and fauna. Himachal Pradesh is of the few provinces of Indian Union which has come little under the influence of the outside world especially the tribal parts of the state. But these areas of the Himachal Pradesh are no longer what they were years back. These areas now have almost all kinds of facilities which have enabled the inhabitants taste the fruits of development being enjoyed by other parts of the state.

Himachal Pradesh has a number of tribal communities such as *Kinnauras*, *Lahaulas*, *Pangwals*, *Swanglas*, *Khampas*, *Bhots/Bodhs*, *Jads*, *Gujjars* and *Gaddis*. They comprise four per cent of the total population of the state. The tribal population constitute the *Kinners* or *Kinnaure*, the *Lahules*, the *Spitians*, the *Pangwals*, the *Gaddis* and the *Gujjars*. Their permanent and semi-permanent dwelling places are in Kinnaur, Lahaul, Pangi and Gadderan (Chamba and Bharmaur). They have their own customs, traditions, religious beliefs, dances and music. Most of these tribes are immensely popular due to their open and friendly temperament.

Marriage is certainly an important event in the life of any individual, which every human being would invariably welcome. People living in tribal Himachal present different and interesting types of marriages and rites and rituals associated with it. In state of Himachal Pradesh a wife is not only a man's better half but is a power incarnate (*Shakti*).

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It is especially on the occasion of a religious celebration, such as marriage, as on such occasion she occupies the foremost place.

Kinnaur which is a mountainous area, ranging in altitude from 2,320 to 6,816 meters, is one of the picturesque district comprises the most of the tribal folks of Himachal Pradesh. It is famous for the Kinner Kailash, a mountain sacred to Hindus, close to the Tibetan border. It is worth noting that no vedic rituals such as going round the fire etc. are followed in the solemnisation of marriage in Kinnaur. People in Kinnaur follow fraternal polyandry system where all the brothers share a wife and if there are more than six brothers then another may be brought in. All the brothers are looked upon as common fathers to the children. The eldest is known as *Teg Bawal* and the youngest as *Gota Bawal*. This tribal folk believe that polyandry is the best way to joint family system and a smart way to safeguard the inherent property from division. However this custom has prevailed for a long time but now it is not in practice. The shortage of good match led the unpaired girls convert herself into a Buddhist nun or Jomo. *Janekang* or *Janetang* marriage practice is also prevalent which means arranged marriage. In *Dam-Chalshish*, the lovers elope together and the boy's father sends the *Mazomi* to the girl's house and tries to placate them and their relatives with gifts. If the family agrees, then a ritual marriage follows. *Darosh* or *Dub-Dub* or *Nymasha depang* or *Nymasha leo* or *Huchis* i.e. marriage by forceful or consented capture. In this the girl is forcibly dragged away from a fair ground or a festival meeting. She pretends to scream, scratch, bite and show annoyance but the boy holding her does not relent his hold. At night the villagers tries to bring the girl to calm and if she agrees then the next day a match-maker goes to her family with a gift of money and a bottle of wine and tries to get their permission. Similar gifts are presented to the village deities. *Har* is a marriage in which a woman, who is dissatisfied with her husband, goes and begins to live with another. Her new husband has to settle it with the previous one by offering him a price acceptable to him.

Lahaul-Spiti, area wise largest district of Himachal Pradesh (13,835 km²) is a cold desert situated at the northern and eastern sides of the Kullu. The area is famous for its scenic valleys, passes and unique traditions, which attract thousands of national and international tourists. In Lahaul three different systems of marriages are prevalent. The *Tebagston* or *Mote Biah*, which means arranged marriage. The *Kawachi Biah* which means arranged but performed very briefly and the *Kunmaibaghstan* or *Kuzi Biah* which means marriage by elopement in which a boy absconds a girl with her consent. In Spiti, there are generally two types of marriages, arranged and *Khandum*. In the *Khandum* marriage, choice is made against the wishes of their parents. In the case of divorce in Lahaul-Spiti, *Sudh Dwaki* is performed in which simple woollen thread is tied to the little finger of both the companions is pulled apart in the presence of some elder person and this decides the issue.

Jhindphook or *Jarar Phooki* which means bush burning is a peculiar form of marriage among the tribes of Chamba. This marriage takes place without the approval of parents. The man and woman set fire to some bush wood in the jungle and walk around it seven times, hand in hand. This makes them husband and wife. It is regarded with disfavour. Gaddis are not nomadic in strictest of sense since they have villages where they reside. These people normally reside in the Chamba, Mandi and Kangra district.

The Gaddis and some labourer families follow the *Batta Satta* system of marriage in which the bride's brother has to marry the groom's sister and vice-versa. In some areas, we do come across polygamy *i.e.* a man marrying more than one woman at a time. Now vast majority of people in Himachal follow the practice of monogamy. Polygamy is ridiculed even in the Hillman's saying: "Two marriages make the life of a man as wretched as that of dog." In Pangri, (remotest area of Chamba district) at the time of marriage, the groom's younger brother presents the bride's mother with a silver rupee. This gives him the right of a second husband over the bride, but the bride is not to be shared by more than two brothers. The people in Pangri are monogamous and a widow may remarry, but such marriages are not held in high esteem. The higher castes do not allow the widows to remarry but the lower castes allow remarriage. In some cases after the death of the elder brother, the younger one marries the widow. Sometimes the widow leaves her husband's house and moves with someone. This is known as *Ghar Karna* (taking another house). Among the lower castes a woman may make four to five such changes of spouse in her lifetime. In such cases the new husband has to undertake the responsibilities for all the children born of previous marriages.

There is a saying in the higher hills that a woman is never a widow or without a partner. If she so wishes, she has little difficulty finding a new husband, for value as a companion, worker in the fields, which seems to be indispensable.

The tribal people are in the phase of transition and are changing themselves as well as their practices related to marriage and family. They have lived in seclusion for centuries together in the hills and forests and lived away from the mainstream. However the progress has been taking place in their attitudes and practices due to education, awareness, interventions by Government and NGOs and many other factors, but still a lot to be done.