

Hinduism's views on Polygamy



*** (Please note some info in this article will upset some woman... I had to included all the information that I could acquire and give a broad minded view... If this upsets you then please accept my apologies. We don't compile things to upset anyone rather give a view from all sides.) ***

Polygamy and polyandry were prevalent in ancient India, but it is doubtful whether they were ever popular in the public opinion. It was practised mostly by the warrior castes (Kshatriyas) and rich merchants (Vaishyas). Many Hindu devas are also depicted as polygamous, with two or more wives. But you should note that the devi's are not actually wives in the physical sense but pure universal energies who assist their husband to maintain dharma (good order) in the universe. They do not possess physical bodies, though they can appear in human form if they want to. Present day Hindus consider both polygamy and polyandry primitive and archaic, remnants of an old society that still haunt the lives of a few unfortunate victims. In India Hindus acknowledge polygamy as both illegal and immoral.

If we study the history of ancient India, we realize that polygamy and polyandry were practised by the rich and the powerful, while the sages and seers were strictly monogamous or completely celibate. We also notice that whether it was in the past or in the present, polygamy was never a popular practice in the public opinion.

Hinduism does not favour Polygamy

Hindu scriptures describe the family as a social institution, and at the same time as an integral part of this illusory world. In the ultimate sense the institution family is meant to keep each individual chained to the world of illusion. The relationships in the family are meant to develop attachment, selfishness and desires. In the end

these relationships really do not last and each individual in it is left to their self.

Hinduism therefore rightly describes the family as an illusion (samsara maya). A family is a coming together of different souls, each having his or her own distinct spiritual agenda and final destiny. Some relationships may last for some lives, but they would not stay for ever. On the cosmic scale each soul has to tread its own path and find its own salvation. The family relationships are in a way a great distraction, because they develop attachment and delay the liberation of the of the soul. What is true and what makes life meaningful is our relationship with God, because in the real sense the hidden self is nothing but God only. Hinduism therefore exhorts every individual to be wary of the illusory nature of the family and develop an divine oriented attitude while performing their obligatory duties as a sacrifice to God.

If family itself is an instrument of maya, polygamy makes it more difficult for an individual to break out of his illusions. Spiritually therefore polygamy is least desirable option for an individual to pursue.

Polygamy in our Shastras...

‘A Sudra male is allowed to have only one wife who should be chosen exclusively from his own caste. A Vaisya is allowed to have two wives; one chosen from his own Vaisya caste and the other from Sudra caste. A Kshatriya is allowed to have three wives; one chosen from his own Kshatriya caste, one from the Vaisya caste and one from the Sudra caste. A Brahmana can have four wives; one from his own Brahmana caste, one from Kshatriya caste, one from Vaisya caste and one from Sudra caste. Compare the following text from the Mahabharata.

From The Mahabharata , Anusasana Parva , Section XLIV

Addressing King Yudhishtira, Bhishma said: A Brahmana can take three wives. A Kshatriya can take two wives. As regards the Vaishya, he should take a wife from only his own order. The children born of these wives should be regarded as equal. Of the three wives of a Brahmana, she taken from his own order should be regarded as the foremost. Similarly, of the two wives permitted to the Kshatriya, she taken from his own order should be regarded as superior. Some say that persons belonging to the three higher orders may take, only for purposes of enjoyment, wives from the lowest or the Shudra order. Others, however, forbid the practice. The righteous condemn the practice of begetting issue upon Shudra women. A Brahmana, by begetting children upon a Shudra woman, incurs the liability of performing an expiation (atonement.) .

That girl who has no brother nor father should not be wed, O chief of Bharata’s race, for she may be intended as Putrika of her sire. [Note: Explanations by Sri Kisari Mohan Ganguli: ‘Putrika’: When a father happens to have an only daughter, he frequently bestows her in marriage upon some eligible youth on the understanding that the son born of her shall be the son, for purposes of both Shraddha rites and inheritance, not of the husband begetting him but of the girl’s father. Such a

contract would be valid whether expressed or not at the time of marriage. The mere wish of the girl's father, unexpressed at the time of marriage, would convert the son into a son not of the father who begets him but of the father of the girl herself. A daughter reserved for such a purpose is said to be a Putrikadharmini or 'invested with the character of a son.' To wed such a girl was not honourable. It was in effect an abandonment of the fruits of marriage. Even if dead at the time of marriage, still if the girl's father had, while living, cherished such a wish, that would convert the girl into a Putrikadharmini. The repugnance to wedding girls without fathers and brothers exists to this day.]

[Note: The Mahabharata acknowledges the authority of Manu which becomes evident from the text reproduced below.]

From The Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva, Section XLIV

Bhishma said: After the appearance of puberty, the girl (if not married) should wait for three years. During the fourth year, she should look for a husband herself (without waiting any longer for her kinsmen to select one for her) offspring of such a girl do not lose their respectability, nor does union with such a girl become disgraceful. If, instead of selecting a husband for herself, she acts otherwise, she incurs the reproach of Prajapati himself. One should wed that girl who is not a Sapinda of one's mother or of the same Gotra with one's father. Even this is the usage (consistent with the sacred law) which Manu has declared..

[Note: In modern day India, as also in other countries where constitution of the country guarantees freedom of religious practices, it is a moot point that Hindus may have been prosecuted for practising polygamy in contravention of their constitutional rights. In India, for example, a person of Islamic faith can have four wives, but Hindus may be prosecuted for marrying more than one woman.]

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