



MARRIAGE SYSTEMS IN ANCIENT SOCIETIES: AN OVERVIEW

JASHANDEEP SINGH ¹

¹ ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, SRI GURU GOBIND SINGH COLLEGE, SECTOR-26, CHANDIGARH (160019).

ABSTRACT:

KEYWORDS:

INTRODUCTION

Human history has always remained engrossing. Probably starting as scavengers, humans have developed a complex social structure through their endeavour. In contemporary times, we can understand earlier human history in more comprehensive manner as there is a trend towards diminution of earlier speculations on human history through the development of technology and their implications in fields of anthropology, archaeology etc. It is exemplified by 'Steven Mithen, an archaeologist, has conceived the primitive human mind as consisting of three entities: a technical intelligence (producing stone tools), a natural history intelligence (understanding the landscape and wildlife around her/him), and a social intelligence (the skills needed to live in groups)'¹. It was this aspect of social intelligence of primitives which led to development of enormous complex social institutions in contemporary times. An important step in this development was development of language, which culminated in development of individual and group consciousness. Language development might have made easy to distinguish one group member from another, and one's own kin within wider groups. Besides language development, the 'socially recognized linking of specific human male to a specific human female and her offspring'² can be marked as important step in the evolution of human species. Another major development in this social intelligence was recognition of kin group and non-kin group. 'Parsons states that a child must move from a sense of the circle of self-and-mother to a sense of self-and-both-parents as a second circle, a sense of

self-and-kin-beyond-parents as a third, and a sense of self-and-non kin-beyond-kin as a fourth one'³.

Initially, there was no social differentiation in primitive communities by abilities or profession, by habits or beliefs. There were no authoritative structures in these tribes. How then, it may be asked, does the primitive tribe hold together. What gives it unity? The answer is through its breeding system⁴. And this has two aspects. First, there is the coherence which is due to all breeding being within the group, which we call endogamy. The second aspect of the breeding system is that all marriage must be outside the family which is this exogamy. The combination of these two factors means that whole group has common ancestors which provided it the unity. Echoing views regarding sense of equality in primitive's anthropologist Richard Lee has summarised his findings:

Before the rise of the state and the entrenchment of social inequality, people lived for millennia in small-scale kin-based social groups, in which core institutions of economic life included collective or common ownership of land and resources, generalised reciprocity in the distribution of food, and relatively egalitarian political relations (Lee, 1988)⁵

A recent study conducted by a team headed by Mark Dyble, an anthropologist, has concluded the same. These 'scientists collected genealogical data from two hunter-gatherer populations, one in the Congo and one in the Philippines, including kinship relations, movement between camps and residence patterns, through hundreds

¹ Watson, P. (2006). *Ideas: A history from fire to Freud*. London: Phoenix.

² Quale, G. R. (1988). *The History of Marriage Systems*. New York: Greenwood Press.

³ Quale, G. R. (1988). *The History of Marriage Systems*. New York: Greenwood Press.

⁴ Darlington, C. (1969). *The Evolution of Man and Society*. London: George Allen and Unwin Limited.

⁵ It is similar to Marxian notion of primitive communism.

of interviews'⁶. On their analysis they concluded that 'it was only with the emergence of agriculture, when people could start to accumulate resources that inequality emerged'⁷.

The expansion of human species was next important milestone in development of human as species. Their expansion to American continent was through Bering Strait⁸. Interaction with environment was the important thing which led to differentiation between the groups of same species but still variation within each group was always greater than variation between them. The development of each group did not depend on anything specific about its genetic set up, but on how it adapted its manipulative skills and forms of cooperation to the needs of making a livelihood in its particular environment. It was interaction with particular environment that shaped economy, polity and philosophy of particular society. These diversities are so enormous that we have reified them. However, these ancient societies shared certain common, fundamental features until about 10,000 years ago⁹. There were no rulers, bosses or class divisions in these societies. It can be easily inferred that egalitarianism had remained basic constituent for the major part of the human history. Richard Lee (1988) is quite right to insist:

It is the long experience of egalitarian sharing that has moulded our past. Despite our seeming adaptation to life in hierarchical societies, and despite the rather dismal track record of human rights in many parts of world, there are signs that humankind retains a deep-rooted sense of egalitarianism, a deep-rooted commitment to the norm of reciprocity, a deep-rooted.... sense of community¹⁰

This period, Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) era of prehistoric human history, was based on the stone tools discovered. We cannot define much of social organization at this point of time, but from paintings of this period we can envisage some general characteristics. 'Sex was one of the main images in early art, and that the depiction of female sex organs is far more widespread than the depiction of male organs. In fact there are no depictions of males in early paintings of around 25,000 years ago and this would therefore seem to support the claim of distinguished Lithuanian archaeologist, Marija Gimbutas, that early human worshipped a 'Great Goddess', rather than a male god. The development of such beliefs had something to do with what at that time would have been the great mystery of birth, the wonder of breastfeeding, and the disturbing

occurrence of menstruation'¹¹. From our vantage point, this was period of simple co-habitation among primitives and social institution of marriage was absent among them. This period can be reckoned as period of sexual promiscuity, as defined by Engels (19. Another important related issue is of incest taboo. While explaining this British Biologist C D Darlington (1969), views that it had started when humans came to be deeply interested in ancestry and kinship. This led to rationalize their instinctive habits. They used their interest and knowledge to develop elaborate and diverse types of structure reckoned by kinship and having the effect of preventing incest. Also the knowledge of weak progeny due to inbreeding, in contrast to crossbreeding, could have led the early men to stop incest, eventually envisioned the system into detailed kinship. Thus, prohibition of incest taboo seems to be first circumscription emerged in human evolution while choosing mating partner. This emergence of practical knowledge regarding weak progeny due to inbreeding, in contrast to cross-breeding, could also have led the early humans to stop incest.

Aristotle the legendary Greek philosopher said, 'Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual'¹² It signifies the importance of relationship between individual and society. It is this social sense among individuals which made themselves superior species. Since their expansion, more differences arose among individuals on the basis of behaviour and habits. This was the period when animal instinct was being overtaken by human reason. In humans, more than animals, his social sense as well as his individual needs tend to turn the preferences of the majority into customs and the laws of whole society¹³. This is how tribes might have emerged among savages. Emergence of such tribal groups also affected breeding system. In sparing population of hunters-gatherers, the working unit (i.e. Tribe) was presumably also breeding unit. This seems to be genesis of tribal endogamy. With expansion of human species, these different tribes would begin to confront each other. This may have led to emergence of exogamy. Thus, endogamy and exogamy might be second circumscription in human evolution while choosing mating partner.

In this stage of human history, we cannot articulate exact marriage system but we can formulate certain hypothesis regarding genesis of marriage system¹⁴. Before the genesis

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<http://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/may/14/early-men-women-equal-scientists> (accessed on 9.7.2015)

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Bering Strait is between Russia and Alaska. Only 82 km wide at its narrowest point, it was passage for primitives to enter American continent (Watson, 2006).

⁹ Harman, C. (2005). *A People's History of the World*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited.

¹⁰ Harman, C. (2005). *A People's History of the World*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited.

¹¹ Watson, P. (2006). *Ideas: A history from fire to Freud*. London: Phoenix.

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<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-educationplus/man-as-a-social-animal/article3010286.ece> (accessed on 18.6.2015)

¹³ Darlington, C. (1969). *The Evolution of Man and Society*. London: George Allen and Unwin Limited

¹⁴ Marriage system involves the sets of rule used in societies to govern the establishment, continuance and dissolution of marriage. It also includes articulation of rules regarding pools

of marriage system among human species, a system of consortship can be envisioned from anthropological readings. Consortship might have emerged due to assurance of 'mutual food-sharing, needed by both the male wanting plant food (in case the day's hunt was unsuccessful) and the female wanting meat (but too fully occupied with infants and young offspring to take much part in hunts)'¹⁵. But still the tedious question remains in front of us: why did marriage emerge? Answer may lie in 'peacemaker' hypothesis.

The concept of territory was quite prevalent in the early hominid. The males of a particular band presumably did not want strange males in their territory. The local males would clash with strange males entering their territory and, of course, strange unreceptive females. We can estimate this behaviour of hominids from group behaviour of chimpanzee. Even in contemporary times humans fought wars with one another in a kind of 'sophisticated mutual group hunt, band versus band, with one band entering the territory of another. This may be an outgrowth of early hominid response to a realisation based on narrowly escaped experience that the lone stranger ran a real risk of being forced to the bottom of a hominid band's dominance hierarchy, or even being killed'¹⁶. Sisters of concerned bands would have played an important role in resolution of conflict between different bands. 'Experience perhaps suggested that if a sister were a consort in a neighbouring band, her recognition of her brother if he came into her new band's territory (whether alone or in a company with other males) would lessen the likelihood of immediate automatic conflict'¹⁷. Thus, it was women who led to resolution of conflict between two aggressive bands and marriage system was by-product of this conflict resolution. Thus, marriage emerged as alliance between different social groups and it remains so in contemporary times though now it has become alliance between families, individuals or both. This alliance had helped involved bands in case of security from external aggression or for joint hunting exercises.

'Archaeologist Brian Hayden argues that hunter-gatherers of the past used a combination of five strategies to create such ties with other groups and to defuse tensions: frequent informal visits, inter-band sharing, gift giving, periodic large gatherings for ritual occasions, and the establishment of marriage and kinship ties.'¹⁸ Thus, this study of Hayden supplements the 'peacemaker' hypothesis. Also 'philosopher Iris Marion Young maintains

that the historical function of marriage was to use women as a means of forging alliances among men and perpetuating their line.'¹⁹ So a consensus seems to be there among certain scholars that Marriage emerged as an alliance and to avoid inter-band conflict. But, no doubt, these are only hypothesis.

One thing which we can make out from studies conducted on primitives is that ancient marriage systems were based on four fundamental considerations (which are even paramount in contemporary marriage systems). These four considerations are: ²⁰

- potentialities for current and immediate future economic well-being that are linked to personal qualities of the partner;
- economic advantages that are linked with whatever economic advantages the family in which the partner grew up may have had;
- potentialities for personal compatibility and gratification that are part of partner's own personal make up;
- long-range prospects in terms of personal health and qualities for whatever children may be born.

Though importance of each consideration varies from one historical period to another but they had remained important in one context or another. One important aspect to be understood from these four considerations is of focus on health. In hominid societies, due to almost absence of medicinal remedies health of women should had remained very fragile. Thus, health issues of women should have attracted more concern than their counterparts. This might explain the prevalence of bride-wealth and bride-service in earlier societies. In these earlier societies, both potential partners and their elders must have made their decisions under unconscious intergenerational transmitted influences based on above written considerations. In these societies, spouse was acquired by direct exchange or as a result of accepting a promise, pledge or prospect of future return (that is, by delayed reciprocity)²¹.

Many thinkers have also presented their views regarding primitives and their marriage systems. Out of these, *magnum opus* of Lewis Henry Morgan namely *Ancient Society* is still considered as influential text for understanding them. 'Immense progress has been registered in the field of archaeology since publication of this text, creating better possibilities for reconstructing the prehistoric foundation of written history, but this has not undermined the basic significance of Morgan's work and his methodology'²². His work is compiled after his

of individuals from which you can marry and whom you cannot marry besides inclusion of rules concerning the holding and transmission of property or status.

¹⁵ Quale, G. R. (1988). *The History of Marriage Systems*. New York: Greenwood Press.

¹⁶ Quale, G. R. (1988). *The History of Marriage Systems*. New York: Greenwood Press.

¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 34

¹⁸ Coontz, S. (2005). *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*. New York: Penguin Books.

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ Quale, G. R. (1988). *The History of Marriage Systems*. New York: Greenwood Press.

²¹ Goody, J. (1984). *Development of the family and marriage in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²² Chattopadhyaya, D. (1982). *Dialectics of Social Evolution: Morgan, Marx and Engels*. *Social Scientist*, 3-20.

extensive research on Iroquois confederacy of USA, especially on Seneca tribe. Based on the theories on Morgan, Karl Marx devised his stage of primitive communism in his theory of historical modes of production. Classic text of Friedrich Engels, *Origin of Family, Private Property and State*, is too based on the findings of Lewis Morgan. Earliest form of marriage described by Morgan is group marriage. In this type of marriage, men live in polygamy and their wives simultaneously in polyandry, and the common children are, therefore, regarded as being common to them all. So, this can be reckoned as first form of human marriage.

Man is tremendously industrious being. It started manifested completely in Neolithic era, though its antecedents lie in Palaeolithic and Mesolithic era. Major important changes started taking place about 10,000 years ago. To these changes Gordon Childe has given the name of *Neolithic Revolution*²³. In his theory of *Neolithic Revolution* he argued that the invention of agriculture had led to the development of first villages and then this new sedentary way of life had in turn led to invention of pottery, which slowly developed into civilization. This neat idea has now been overturned, for it is quite clear that Sedentism, the transfer from hunter-gathering lifestyles to villages, was already under way by the time agricultural revolution took place²⁴. The first area where this change took place is known as 'Fertile Crescent'. It comprises Jordan valley in Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Zagros Mountains in modern Iraq and Iran, and south-east Turkey (known as Mesopotamia). Second area related to this change is region which runs from New Mexico to Guatemala and Ecuador which we may describe as Mesoamerica. These changes make life of people much easier. 'They had grown accustomed, over two or three millennia, to a life in areas where conditions had been such as to provide bountiful supplies of wild plant food and animals to hunt- in one area in south east turkey, for instance, a 'family group' could, 'without working very hard', gather enough grain from wild cereals in three weeks to keep them alive for a year'²⁵. Domestication of plants and animals, and Sedentism were two important steps and major turning point in the human history²⁶. They developed sense of community and cooperation which led to development of social structure and social institutions, as we understand them from our vantage point. While defining change due to these processes, Chris Harman (2005) writes:

*On occasions the spread of crop raising and herding led to one final important change in social life- the first differentiation into social ranks. What anthropologists call 'chieftainships' or 'big men' arose, with some individuals or lineages enjoying much greater prestige than others, and this could culminate in the establishment of heredity chiefs and chiefly lineages. But even these were not anything like the class distinctions we take for granted, with one section of society consuming the surplus which other toil to produce*²⁷.

Areas of Orkney and Malta also had a special class of people apart from general population²⁸. This social differentiation also started reflecting in the biological aspects. In Chatal Huyuk at first we are shown a society in which women are masters²⁹. So, it was during Neolithic period that social differentiation, if not social stratification, started reflecting in human history. It was in this environment that important changes started taking place in society. Sedentism impacted social life in many aspects. With change in production processes supplemented by hoe agriculture and subsequently followed by plough agriculture, population started increasing exponentially. This population growth led to more clear differentiation between lineages and hence marriage system. It was in this context that patriarchal or matrilineal systems started emerging, though their antecedents can be traced to earlier hunting-gathering societies. In these earlier societies 'men may have increasingly used their greater command of coercive force to arrange women's marriage for them, in efforts to extend the band's hunting range by forming alliances with other bands. Rather than accepting women's equal wish to have a voice in mate selection, out of brotherly empathy with sisters who had grown with themselves, they might have simply used arguments about the needs to band to override objections to specific matches'³⁰. So, it was this turn to agrarian mode of production that individual choice for specific partner started becoming less important and societal factors for marriage becomes more paramount.

Another important difference was focus on inheritance rather than transmitted knowledge in earlier societies. Since sedentism was not present to much extent in earlier hunter-gatherer societies, so question of inheritance regarding property was not much relevant. Rather focus was given on the transmitted knowledge and skills regarding hunting and other survivals techniques. It was in the context that person-centeredness (it's who you are and how you relate to others that count) started overtaking performance-centeredness (it's what you do and how well you do it that counts). Next important change was focus on obedience. Obedience, thus, can be reckoned as 'invention'

²³ Ralph, E. M. (1958). *World Civilizations from Ancient to Contemporary*. New York: Norton .

²⁴ Watson, P. (2006). *Ideas: A history from fire to Freud*. London: Phoenix.

²⁵ Harman, C. (2005). *A People's History of the World*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited.

²⁶ However many early societies did not opt for agriculture. Many of them continued with traditional hunting-gathering societies.

²⁷ Harman, C. (2005). *A People's History of the World*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited.

²⁸ Watson, P. (2006). *Ideas: A history from fire to Freud*. London: Phoenix

²⁹ Darlington, C. (1969). *The Evolution of Man and Society*. London: George Allen and Unwin Limited.

³⁰ Quale, G. R. (1988). *The History of Marriage Systems*. New York: Greenwood Press.

of agrarian social structure. This might have risen due to the focus on inheritance of property which started becoming vital to survival in these agrarian societies. Disobedience could have been frowned upon and have led to extirpation from community. This must have impacted the mate selection process and personal say must have become secondary to familial consideration³¹ (though its antecedents lie in earlier hunting-gathering societies).

Another important change in marriage system is regarding its dissolution. 'In most societies without private property, marriages tend to be fragile, and women whose families have arranged their marriages frequently leave their husbands or run off with lovers without suffering any reprisals.'³² However there was abrupt change in dissolution of marriage in agrarian societies. Emergence of private property focused on rigidity of marriage and made its dissolution much difficult due to likely emergence of property issues. So, it was emergence of private property which led to melancholy in marital relationships. Thus, this period in human history can be reckoned as regressive for mate selection process.

As discussed above marriage was an alliance between different groups in hunter-gatherer societies. It used to focus on extension of cooperative relationships and use of resources beyond local group. With a step towards agrarian societies this system changed 'as societies developed surpluses and become more sedentary, populous and complex. As kin group began to assert permanent rights over territory and resources, some families amassed more goods and power than others. When that happened, the wealthier families lost interest in sharing resources, pooling labour, or developing alliances with poor families. Gradually marriage exchanges became a way of consolidating resources rather than creating a circle of reciprocal obligations and connections. With growth of inequality (it conjointly emerged with private property) in society, the definition of an acceptable marriage narrowed. Wealthy kin groups refused to marry with poorer ones and disavowed and children born to couples whose marriages they had not authorised. This shift constituted a revolution in marriage that was to shape people's lives for thousands of years. Whereas marriage had once been a way of expanding the number of cooperative groups, it now becomes a way for powerful kin groups to accumulate both people and property.'³³ So

³¹ Familial importance in these agrarian societies can also be viewed from another angle. The first Middle Eastern societies (since 9000 B.C) show a definite separation between sleeping huts and storage huts. In lieu of joint food storage, family food storage started emerging. With that separation of ours-and-yours within the village, the larger community within basic family clusters of spouses and children lived must have finally ceased to have the unity of the hunting-gathering band. Thus familial (not nuclear but kin based extended families) considerations overtook band-based considerations.

³² Coontz, S. (2005). *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*. New York: Penguin Books.

³³ *ibid*

for property holders, marriage becomes economic transaction which was inextricably intertwined with its consolidation as well as formulation of social relationships to perpetuate their hegemony. In this context, when marriage became as means to transmit status and property, marriage as social institution becomes more restrictive and individuals and whims were subjugated to it.

Another important change, as envisioned by some scholars like Bertrand Russell, emergence of agrarian societies coincided with emergence of patriarchy. Critically analysing, we can differentiate that this was so in many societies but not all. Russell viewed that important changes takes place in this society. 'As soon as a father recognises that his child is, his 'seed', his sentiment towards child is reinforced by two factors, the love of power and the desire to survive death.'³⁴ The issue of clear descent in this era of emergence of private property became paramount. The focus on virginity of females was reminiscent of this development. Even 'love as a relation between men and women was ruined by the desire to make sure the legitimacy of children.'³⁵

Thus, agrarian structures hardened societal rules regarding the match making process and also subdued the will of individual to that of the society. Hence marriage emerged and it changed according to the changes in holistic structure of the society.

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³⁴ Russell, B. (1976). *Marriage and Morals*. London: Unwin Paperbacks

³⁵ *ibid*.

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