

Reet: A Paradigm Of Marriage In Shimla Hill States

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Abstract: This research article deals with the one of the forms of marriage in Western Himalayas particularly in Shamla Hill states of British times. British Government in India questioned its cultural and legal validity and abolished. But local Rulers and peasantry protested against its abolition. In fact the custom of 'Reet' was prevalent among the Kanets and Kasha tribes of the region not among the Rajputs and Brahmanas.

Keywords: Kasha, Reet, Kanet, Shimla hill states and Kolis

There was a cluster of twenty-eight states and Feudatories popularly known as the Shimla Hill States, which were situated around the present Shimla district. These states were bordered on the east by the high wall of the Himalayas; on the north-west by the mountains of Spiti and Kulu, and lower down by the Satluj separating them from the state of Suket and Kangra proper; on the south-west by the plain of Ambala, and the south-east by Garhwal.

Out of twenty-eight states, nine were sub -feudatories and in the records of the period covered by this study, they were referred as States, Estates, Thakurais and Sub-feudatories. But like other states, they corresponded directly with the Superintendent; Hill States. The people of Shimla Hill States hug their primitiveness as much as they embrace the pinnacles of civilization. The present article deals with the 'Reet' a primitive paradigm of marriage popular among the Kanets and Khasas of Shimla hill states.

Marriage is the most ancient and important *Samskara* (*Sacrament*) among the Hindu. Even today ceremonies and virtues of marriage which were prescribed in the *Grhyasutras* are still followed in present day hilly societies. The proclaimed purpose of marriage was to perform scarifices and procreate sons. The unmarried man was considered deficient. The *Satapatha Brahmana* tell us that 'The wife is indeed half of one's self; therefore, as long as a man does not marry a wife, as long he does not begot child or progeny he is not complete, but when he marries a wife and beget a progeny, he became complete.¹ In *The Mahabharata* wife was declared to be the source of *trivarga*, that is *Dharma* or religious scarifices,

Artha or wealth, and *Kama* or sex and other pleasure. Manu tells us that no wife alone depends the procreation of sons, the performance of religious rites, faithful service, highest conferral happiness and heavenly bliss for the ancestors and oneself. Thus, it seems from above reference to marriage where *Vivaha* or women were used as tool procreate children and merely source of *Trivarga*. The *Vivah* was made obligatory for every person; because, in the first place, the birth of a son not a girl was said to enable one to obtain *moksha* (salvation). It is also believed that one's progeny is considerably connected with salvation and tool to happiness both in this world as well as hereafter.

However, our ancient law givers advise that if girls parents and elders fail to arrange her marriage within the proper time, it is permissible for such young girls to take the whole responsibility upon herself of choosing her life-mate and enter into the wedlock with him.⁴ *Vatsayana*, too, advises a young maiden who has attained youth to select a husband for herself and get married without waiting for the help and permission of her elders.

According to the forms of marriage usually listed are monogamy, polygamy, and polyandry and group marriage. But in dealing with the hilly areas marriage, we shall use the expression 'paradigms' of marriage conveniently to denote the method of consecrating a marriage union. The paradigms that are enumerated:

GADRU: This form, consisting of the gift of a daughter by the father and *saptpadi* ceremony takes place in brides' fathers' house.

PARANU: This form of also involve the gift of the daughter as above and the *Sapatpadi* ceremony takes place in bridegroom father house.

REET: This form, wherein the father gives his daughter in marriage to the bridegroom, after receiving little money, in accordance with requirement of community customs and not in any sense with the intention of selling the daughter. In other words, the amount of money is to be made as a token of gratitude to the man who offers his daughter to the groom to enable him to fulfill his *Grihasht asrama* obligations.

HAAR: This form is described as the forcible abduction of a girl and someone's wife. It can be termed the capture of the bride by force.

The most accepted paradigm of marriage in hills of Shimla is of course the gift of the daughter, by elders, to the bridegroom, i.e., any of the first three forms

The 'Reet' form of marriage was prevalent in Shimla hill states, a disgusting social custom. It was one of the marriage forms in Shimla hill particularly among low caste people and Kanet and Khasha communities. This form of marriage is 'too fragile to last long, patently an innovation of locales. Under this form of marriage, a woman could divorce her husband and get married with another man'. Generally this form of marriage was without any ritual or ceremony and was finalized after receiving little money from bridegroom father as a token of gratitude ,the amount paid to girl father was called as 'Reet'. 'Reet' is a temporary marriage without any formal ceremony, and is dissolved by the woman taking a new husband, who pays the first husband the money originally paid to the girl's parents, customarily Rs. 1 to 1000. Col. Wace, however, is of opinion that Reet was "not a form of marriage at all, but merely the payment usually made on marriage. The marriage tie being loose at best, if the woman goes off with another man, the new husband was required to reimburse the former husband." The Kanets were practically by far the most important element in the rural population of the whole of the Shimla States. Mr. Macnabh writes as follows: "The Rajputs and superior Brahmins perform a regular marriage ceremony. Many Brahmins, all the Kanets and the Kolis have the following custom: In Kanawar and beyond the Bispa polyandry prevails. In the lower parts of Bashahr, polyandry was struggling with the custom of 'Reet'. In the rest of these hills, except where they border on the plains, the custom of 'Reet' prevails. They were popularly supposed to be the Rajputs who have lost caste by allowing the practices of paying money for a wife, and of the second marriage of widows (karewa). In the Shimla Hills, four classes among the Kanets rank higher than the rest and the known by the title of Khuudh (Char). Their names were Bhaunthi, Parhiar, Chhippar, and Balhir. The other subdivisions of the tribe in these hills were: Kohal, Gahru, Baruri, Chakar, KatLehrn, Suraji, Khash, Badni, Charola, Badalwal, Jalanu, Rohal, Katalik, Pirwal, Janwal, Dolal, Rohana, Kulharnun, Noru, Laddogarh. The Kanets, and indeed, all classes of the hill population were simple-minded, orderly people, quiet and peaceful in their pursuits, But the Reet form of marriage in hill societies is similar to the 'Arsha' form of marriage approved by the ancient Indian law givers, wherein the father gives his daughter in marriage to the bridegroom, after receiving a cow and a bull as a token of gratitude to the father of the girl. Thus,

it is clear that Reet money was not a bride price and this institution of Reet did not result in the sloppiness of sexual relations and total disregard of laws of chastity as C. L. Dutta depicted it. Dutta further argues that the effect of such slipshod relationship, whether on the character of sex-relationship or on racial truthful in character, and submissive to authority advancement are disastrous.

He says that,'since Reet form of marriage is purely mechanical, being based on money bargain, it is not regarded as sacred human relationship'. But C. L. Dutta did not bother about the present form of marriage system in India where marriages are based on money bargain as dowry which results in increasing the crime against women in present day India.

Y. S. Parmar had intimate knowledge of the practical effects of the custom of Reet in Hill States who states that the custom of Reet was more responsible for the steadily increasing the degeneration of the people than all other evils put together. He further argues that domestic relations have been torn to shreds, marriage has lost its sanctity and society has been deprived of all that makes it a means of civic welfare. It allows too wide a latitude to the people in selecting or divorcing their mates and, unrestricted by any moral scruples, the sexual instinct in them find free play. During the first quarter of the 20th century, some local social reformers and organizations started working for its abolition. The *Rajput Sthania Sabha* and the *Himalays Vidiya Parabandhani Sabha*, Shimla, created awareness among the locales about the evils of the Reet. In 1907, The *Himalaya Vidiya Parabandhani Sabha* wrote to Colonel Doughlas, the then Superintendent of the Shimla hill states, to take measures to stop the custom. Doughlas called the meeting of the Chiefs of Hill states to do away with the social evils of "Reet", and all the chiefs agreed to abolish this custom, but no effective measures were adopted by them.

On July 26, 1910, the Political Agent, Phulkian States and Bahawalpur, addressed the Superintendent, Hill States, on the subject, to discourage the custom of 'Reet'. Thereupon, the Patiala darbar issued an order declaring that the custom was illegal in the state.¹¹ Dalip Singh, the Rana of Baghat, issued an order for the abolition of Reet custom and it was enforced with effect from 23July1917: to marry a woman by Reet is forbidden .Neither man nor woman shall perform Reet, nor a woman whose husband is alive shall become another man's wife by Reet. No man shall keep as wife any woman whose husband is alive. Whoever will commit breach of these provisions, shall be punished under Seditions 497,363,366,494and 496 of the Indian Penal Code and any one proved to be an accomplice in a Reet affair shall be liable to be punished under Act xxv of 1856. However, it is noticed that in both the States of Patiala and Baghat, law against the *Reet* was not enforced with strictness; the order in this respect therefore, remained a dead letter.

In order to abolish this custom some states levied a tax on *Reet* marriage, but this remained as a tool to enhance the income of the states, and this tax was opposed by the subjects of the states, even in the Pajhauta *pargana* caused the firing on the subjects. Thus, it is noticed that 'Reet'custom was used by the states chiefs as a tool to enhance their income in their respective states.

However, Shanti Devi, wife of Thakur Surat Singh, also tried to raise the question of 'Reet'-with the wives of high British officials. On November 6, 1924, she wrote to Mrs. Abraham, wife of E. G. F. Abraham, Superintendent, Hill States 'that 'Reet' was a regular traffic in women, which should be checked immediately. Shanti Devi requested Mrs. Abraham to discuss the matter with Lady Hailey, wife of sir Malcolm Hailey, Governor-General of Punjab, and Mrs Minchin, wife of A. B. Minchin, Agent to the Governor-General for Punjab States and issue a letter to all the *Maharanis* and *Ranis* of hill states, to use their influence for the abolition of the Reet custom in their respective states. However, all effects made by Shanti Devi failed: nothing was done by the wives of the British officials in this regards.

However, on June 27, 1924, in the conference of the chiefs of Shimla Hill States, it was unanimously resolved that 'Reet' should be abolished and that a Sub-Committee consisting of the Chiefs or Managers of Bashahr, Jubbal, Baghat, Baghal, Kumarshain, Bhajji and Theog under the chairmanship of the Raja of Keonthal was appointed to prepare a draft bill. Rai Bahadur Sher Singh, Wazir of Keonthal state, was to work as the Secretary of Sub-committee.

However, after the comprehensive debate and consideration between local social reformers, state chiefs and British high official the issue remained unresolved. It was observed that certain chiefs of local states were not in favour of any legislation, because its enforcement was likely to cause restlessness in their respective states. The Wazer of Bilaspur was of the view that the Reet was prevalent in Borali and Kotkhai areas of the Shimla district which was directly under the control of British Government, why did not British Government abolish this custom? The British administrator from Shimla intimated the Wazer of Bilaspur state that the people of these regions are averse to the abolition and they are under the impression that in case of its abolition, they would have no wives. Therefore, future generation would cease.

Thus, it is noticed that Kanats and Kolis of hill states did not consider 'Reet' neither immoral, nor, in any way, unlawful. It was felt that if the force was used to abolish the Reet, they would revolt. Therefore, to suppress such a rebellion, the local chiefs require help of the police or army from the British Government. The Chiefs of the Shimla hill States were not prepared to do so. The social reformers and British Administrators did not understand the multi-dimensional socio-economic ramifications which were connected with the abolition of the 'Reet' form of marriage which was approved in their *Dharmasashtras*. States chiefs did not want to annoy the Kaneits, Khashas and Kolis who were infavour of this custom, were the backbone of hill state's economy. These people rendered innumerable services to their respective states under *Begar* and *Beth* system. Thus, hill chiefs could not afford to annoy largest segment of people in their states. Even British Government in India also could not afford any turmoil and rebellion in the hills states, by which its capital was hemmed in and did not want to spoil the peace in its summer capital Shimla.

However, even after the independence of India the custom of 'Reet' prevailed in some parts of Shimla District for instance a young girl Naardei got married in Kasle village of

Dodra Kwar region of Shimla district, without her consent for Reet form of marriage. Her parents received one thousand rupees as Reet from the groom father. Naardei was departed like a cow sold for an excellent price .She felt that her dream was shattered forever. The local folk song runs:

"Bisare noohi lei bhagi,
Chawlu ko lei suhayam,
Tanoo manjhi koolei dama,
Hajara lei rupaiya."¹⁶

'While rotating as sound develop in thresher;
With Karju thus Nardei fled to Bhusher.
As wind spread all over dust;
Thus thousand rupee is my cost.

A poor village carpenter (Barhai) has a soft corner for Naardei .The young girls from nearby village teases Karju,please get us married with the young boys of your village'.Karju , 'yes of course, but not all of you'. Girls', 'So, get married the prettiest of us.' Karju, Not at all'. 'Why'? Who will be paying the heavy 'REET' amount on your departure? Is't right for parents to accept Reet in your own village? Asked the girls. "They do accept, but not all of them. And those accepting, not more than a hundred silver coins"

"But, it is an ever expanding custom of Reet over there, in the villages of Fateh Mountains, who have married their girls to them."

"It's good then!", the girls.

At this, Karju said, "It is a great curse to accept *Reet*, *Dheri* or *Raash* (cash money?) Over a Bride or a girl. My poor mates are unable to get married. If they do, they have to mortgage their trees, fields etc. just to bring a bride. Its burden on the bride who herself becomes a mother in the future."

"And moreover, the parents are getting a big hoard by selling their daughter like a cow; do earn the fury of destiny."

"It's a greatest sin to accept even a rupee in *Reet* over the girl. Anyone willing to accept a bride from here certainly has to shell out one to two thousand to pay *Reet*."

A girl said on this, "The biggest the *Reet*, the biggest' will be the honour either at in-laws or in parents house"

Karju,"Yes of course! Honour is definitely earned, but I see whatever the amount of *Reet* the parents accept and the groom side is over-eager to pay, a girl can't be a happier lot in her married life."

Naardei eloped with Karju (a carpenter) to Kawar when, her in laws came to know about it. Her father -in law asks the *Panch* to settle the issue, and urgent meeting of Panch was called to settle the issue between Naardei father and her father - law .When father of Naardei was told that Garete (father -in -law) wants his son's bride back, he said,"

Then Panch asks Naardei, "Garete wants you to be back. What do you say?"

"I won't leave this place of its attraction and love, which pulled me here."

"Okay, all right," said a Panch, "if he attempts forcibly?"

"Not a power exists to get me forcibly out of here."

"If so, Karju had to pay off the bride price (Reet) as per Garete's demand."

"The question does not arise at all."

"How?"

"Why do have to Karju? I have not eloped with him. But I am here due to the heinous misconduct of my father. Only that person will be paying off Garete's *Dheri*."

While answering the question of Panchayat, Garete said, "Not a penny less than five times of the *Raash* paid."

Giving a deep thought over all the matter, the panches gave the verdict, "According to the local custom, there is a provision of two *dheris*, but the panchayat also took notice of caste as Rajput girl eloping with a Harijan boy. For that, Karju cannot be blamed. The Grate's *bahu* herself came after two days. So a *Raash* of three times be fixed from Karju."

Hearing Panchayat's verdict, Grate still thought about the incompetence of Karju to pay off thousands. He had to sell himself head to feet. Not only this. He has to get enslaved his mother and younger brother. Only then his *Dheri* will be completed.

On such a public sentiment, Naeda expressed his desire to see his daughter Naardei, but she out rightly refused to meet her father. She felt a high tide rising within. Sensing her mood the Panches came out. While descending step, Nardei took everyone's attention. Naeda broke in tears looking at daughter. There she stood calm and straight before Panches.

Still crying he said, "I brought you up with much love and affection but only to find myself ashamed before the people? I'd be rather a proud if you eloped with a Rajput. But your elopement with a Harijan has made whole of my (*khandan*) family to sue for honour for the generations to come."

"I did not want to see you at all. But I have got along the Panches just to convey them to avoid bringing up a venomous '*nagin*' like you. She won't even spare him who sustained her life."

"I question your designs for my upbringing? Just to quench the greed so as to sell her like a polite cow to a butcher, to get a good amount?"

Secondly, I was tied from one stake to the other, without getting my nod, which did not need a bride but a slave in bridal attire. Do you call it a marriage? Where there is a huge age gap between the bride and the groom.

Thirdly, I had a strong desire since long to get myself married here. So that such further relations may develop thereafter between Dadesho and Pandrisho communes. Further, it could have resulted in a permanent check in the sheep abduction incidents and merciless killing of our beasts in and around the temples.

"And above all it was my lifelong desire to put a permanent end to the Manjhivan problem, stretched so far since long, so that the beasts of both communities could graze the beasts in summer and in Garwal forest during the winter. The arousal of such a sense of brotherhood among them will lead to end skirmishes over the little patches and boundary disputes."

Naardei further accuses her father arranging an unspecified marriage; 'he robbed an innocent man (Karju) of his earrings. Not only this, he attacked a sleeping, helpless man to bleed profusely'.

"Thus, he made his daughter feel ashamed and disgraced in the world. Now you tell me, am I at fault? These very facts and causes forced me to land here."

"I want to make it you very clear that until the existence of such greedy fathers, we the daughters should pose as

Nagins to save ourselves from being sold like the beasts of burden. And on their greedy pretensions of upbringing in pseudo-love and affection, should be bitten at once. Their venom thus released in their bodies be let diluted till they make verbal departure from the *Reet*, *Rash* and *Dheeri* as such, on grooms forever."

"I came here only for such. But I see, I am still misunderstood here."

"I didn't elope with Karju. But I got awaken Nanda from the bed and followed him in disguise so as to tread the right path and save me from the high-headed feeling. May I be in love with Karju? I would have proudly entered his house just over there below the courtyard."

"I stayed here in a Rajput house, as I was still apprehensive of getting married to a Rajput. But even here, my name was sung along with Karju and a lyric was composed on the very third day." "Even the boys disappointed me of which I had a good hope. Neither my feelings nor sanctity were taken seriously."

CONCLUSION

Consequently, it can be deduced from the brief description of above folk song of Dodra-Kwar that Naardei questioned the feudal custom of 'Reet' where woman was being treated as a chattel and reduced to the level of non-living being. Eventually, Naardei decided to be a wife of a carpenter rather than to be a wife of a Rajput, paid a 'Reet' amount for her.

Therefore, it can be assumed that the *Reet* form of marriage, wherein the father gives his daughter in marriage to the bridegroom, after receiving little money, in accordance with prerequisite of the hilly people social traditions and not in any sense with the purpose of selling the daughter. *Reet* form of marriage in hilly societies is similar to the 'Arsha' form of marriage approved by the ancient Indian law givers, wherein the father gives his daughter in marriage to the bridegroom, after receiving a cow and a bull as a token of gratitude to the father of the girl. Thus, it is apparent that *Reet* money was not a bride price and *Reet* did not result in the sloppiness of sexual relations and total disregard of laws of chastity as C. L. Dutta put it, but facsimile of *Arsha* form of Hindu marriage.

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