

Traditional verses Modern Engagement & Marriage Customs of Scheduled Tribe of Kinnaur

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Abstract: *Present study deals with the unparalleled engagement and wedding customs of scheduled tribe of Kinnaur district. The word 'Tribe' itself indicates a distinct feature, the tribes reside in Himachal Pradesh have their own distinct creed, culture and customs. Kinnaura Tribe is one of the famous tribes of Himachal Pradesh, resides in Kinnaur district. It is known for its distinctive culture, rich folklore, and unique marriage practices. Traditionally, Kinnauri society followed systems like polyandry, fraternal, joint family system, arranged negotiations, and community mediated rituals. With education, migration, legal reforms, and exposure to wider socio-economic influences, marriage patterns have undergone significant change. This paper explores the contrast between traditional and modern engagement and marriage customs in Kinnaur and analyses how socio-economic transformations have reshaped family structures, gender relations and ritual practices.*

Keyword: Kinnaura, Tribe, Engagement, Wedding, customs, Traditions, Family Structure, Migration, Education, Socio-Economic Transformations

1. Introduction

The Kinnaur district, located in the high-altitude region of Himachal Pradesh, is home to the **Kinnaura tribe**, officially recognized as a Scheduled Tribe under the Constitution of India. The region is noted for its unique cultural synthesis of **Hinduism, Buddhism, and animistic traditions**. Marriage, as an institution, has historically played a central role in preserving lineage, land, religion, and kinship patterns.

Traditionally, Kinnauri society practiced monogamy, fraternal polyandry, bride service, Jari remarriages, and arranged alliances. Engagements and marriages were community-centered, economically supported by collective networks, and performed under the guidance of **Lamas or local priests**. However, rapid socioeconomic development over the last five decades has introduced significant shifts with the spread of education, mobility, modern communication, and the influence of state laws, Kinnauri society has undergone noticeable changes. Modern engagement and marriage customs increasingly incorporate mainstream Hindu practices, legal formalities, and simplified rituals, marking a shift from collective community celebrations to more personalized and contemporary choices. These transitions highlight the dynamic nature of Kinnauri culture, which continues to balance preservation with adaptation.

This study explores the contrast between traditional and modern engagement and marriage customs of the Scheduled Tribe of Kinnaur, examining how cultural values, economic factors, and social norms have evolved over time. Understanding these changes offers insight into the broader processes of cultural transformation among tribal communities in India.

2. Review of Literature

Literature from past three decades on the Kinnaura tribe have highlighted the gradual transformation of marriage practices, particularly the decline of traditional polyandry

and the influence of modernization, education, and legal frameworks. Key contributions include;

1. Negi (1996) provided foundational descriptions of polyandry and kinship among the Kinnaura tribe. He emphasized how fraternal polyandry functioned to preserve land, maintain family cohesion, and manage scarce resources in high-altitude regions. The study highlighted the adaptive and socially regulated nature of traditional marriage practices, forming a baseline for later research.
2. Sharma (2001) explored the social organization of Kinnauras, linking polyandry to economic motivations and communal stability. He also examined the role of religious practices in legitimizing marriage arrangements. The research demonstrated that marriage customs were both pragmatic and culturally sanctioned.
3. Dogra (2004) analyzed the influence of Hinduism and Buddhism on Kinnauri rituals and marital ceremonies. He showed how religious syncretism shaped engagement, wedding, and post-marital rites. The study revealed that religion played a central role in maintaining traditional customs even amid evolving social contexts.
4. Rawat and Negi (2010) documented cultural transitions in tribal districts of Himachal Pradesh. They noted the gradual decline of polyandry and extended-family systems due to modernization, education, and outside influences. The research highlighted how socio-economic changes were reshaping traditional marriage practices.
5. Census data from 1961-2021 show demographic shifts in Kinnaur, including rising literacy, mobility, and reduced prevalence of polyandry. The statistical trends indicate the influence of modernization and changing social structures on marital customs. However, the data do not provide insights into personal experiences, cultural meaning, or women's agency within marriages.
6. The study by Antakshari and Devi (2025) examined male perspectives in polyandrous households in Kinnaur, showing that polyandry continues to serve economic and cooperative functions in a few families.

However, the small sample size and lack of women's perspectives limit understanding of intra-household dynamics. Similarly, Kumari and Jamali (2024) linked polyandry with landholding and inheritance practices, emphasizing its role in preserving ancestral property and economic stability, though social dynamics and women's agency were not deeply explored.

7. Recent ethnographies document significant cultural and social changes. 2023 ethnographic study detailed rituals, marriage structure, and the declining prevalence of polyandry, noting that some families now limit co-husbands or adopt monogamous arrangements (Anonymous, 2023). Himachal Watcher (2021) reported broader socio-economic shifts, such as improved connectivity, horticulture, tourism, and rising education, which correlate with the decline of polyandry and adoption of nuclear family systems.
8. The literature consistently shows that polyandry, once central to Kinnaura social organization, is declining due to modernization, education, and changing economic conditions (Antakshari & Devi, 2025; Anonymous, 2023; Kumari & Jamali, 2024). While hybrid forms of marriage are emerging, traditional rituals persist in modified forms, demonstrating negotiation between cultural preservation and adaptation (Himachal Watcher, 2021; Quest Journals, 2022).

Research Gaps

Despite these insights, several gaps remain: studies rarely explore women's experiences and agency in both polyandrous and modern marriages; longitudinal data on intergenerational changes are limited; comprehensive demographic coverage across Kinnaur is lacking; and the impact of these transitions on tribal identity, inheritance laws, and gender relations remains underexplored.

3. Methodology

Present study is based on Primary as well as secondary sources.

The primary data for the study gathered from a purposeful and well-structured field survey. The survey was conducted during November 2024. Qualitative information was collected and the techniques employed to collect information from field were interview schedule, observation technique and informal discussions. The sample was based on stratified random sampling.

In accordance with the interview method of study, key persons were selected from the village under study to get idea of the socio-cultural life of the villages. The respondents were chosen to represent the different sections of the village. The data was collected mostly from the village surveys of Pangi, Nichar and Jangi villages.

Various books and other unpublished scripts were also taken into account to construct a coherent picture of social life of Kinnaura community.

4. Engagement & Wedding Ceremony Traditional and Present Scenario: An Evaluation

The traditional and modern engagement and marriage customs of the Kinnaura Scheduled Tribe reveal a clear cultural transition shaped by social, economic, and religious influences. Traditionally, engagements were intimate, community-centered events held within the household, where elders negotiated alliances, exchanged tokens such as local wine, chilgoza, and woolen garments, and consulted Lamas for astrological compatibility, reflecting long-held cultural norms (Negi, 1996; Sharma, 2001). Marriages followed diverse forms-including fraternal polyandry, monogamy, love unions, and bride service-each rooted in the socio-economic realities of a land-dependent, joint-family-oriented society (Singh, 1995; Goldstein, 1971). Wedding rituals emphasized spiritual and communal ethics: the groom's procession was greeted with traditional instruments, a Lama or local priest performed sacred rites, the couple circled the Kul Devta instead of a sacred fire, and the entire village participated in feasts, local brews, and Nati dances, highlighting a collective celebration of kinship and faith (Dogra, 2004; Rawat & Negi, 2010).

In contrast, modern engagement and marriage customs show a marked shift toward urbanized, individual-centered celebrations. Engagements now take place in decorated halls or hotels, feature ring exchanges and professional photography, and involve digital invitations rather than elder-led negotiations, demonstrating the growing influence of technology and urban lifestyles (Thakur, 2013). Marriage practices have changed even more profoundly: polyandry has nearly vanished due to legal constraints and shifting social attitudes, with monogamy becoming standard across the district (Census of India, 2011; Sharma, 2001). Hindu wedding elements such as phere, mangal sutra, and Sanskrit mantras have increasingly entered the ceremony, though Buddhist Lamas still hold ceremonial significance in certain households, indicating a hybridization of religious identities (Dogra, 2004). Weddings today are more commercialized, often held in community halls or hotels with caterers, DJs, and event managers organizing the event, replacing the older model of community-supported celebrations (Thakur, 2013). Economically, nuclear-family financing has replaced collective arrangements, and customs such as bride service or Jari payments have nearly disappeared (Rawat & Negi, 2010). Together, these contrasts illustrate how the Kinnaura tribe is adapting to modern influences-legal, economic, religious, and technological-while still preserving select elements of its traditional cultural identity.

Table 1.1: Traditional vs. Modern Engagement & Marriage Customs of Kinnauras A Comparison

Aspect	Traditional Practices	Modern Practices
Engagement	Mediated by elders; exchange of wine, dried fruits; rituals at home	Ring ceremony, digital invites, hotel-based events
Marriage Type	Polyandry, monogamy, Jari remarriage, bride service	Predominantly monogamy; polyandry nearly extinct
Ritual Authority	Lama/local priest; animistic deities	Lama + Hindu pandits; legal registration
Ceremony Style	Community-driven; village-focused; simple	Commercialized; event-managed; expensive
Bride Price/Jari	Symbolic, traditional	Largely discontinued
Venue	Bride's home; village courtyard	Hotels, banquet halls
Attire	Heavy woolen fabrics; silver ornaments	Mix of traditional + modern bridal wear
Feast	Community-funded; local dishes; homemade brew	Caterers; multi-cuisine menus
Kinship System	Extended, joint family structures	Nuclear families dominate
Partner Choice	Elders decide; limited premarital contact	Love-cum-arranged marriages increasing

Source: Based on secondary data

Discussion

The transformation of marriage customs among the Kinnauras reflects a transition from community-centered traditionalism to individual-centered modernity. While cultural symbols such as traditional attire, Nati dance, and the Kinnauri cap remain strong markers of identity, many older practices have weakened or disappeared.

Key Forces of Change

1. **Education & Literacy** - empowered youth and encouraged personal choice.

2. **Economic Restructuring** - apple orchards and tourism increased income, leading to commercialization.

3. **Legal Frameworks** - Indian marriage laws discouraged polyandry and Jari payments.

4. **Migration** - exposure to urban lifestyles influenced wedding styles.

5. **Religious Shifts** - stronger influence of mainstream Hindu rituals.

Despite modernization, the cultural essence of unity, communal celebrations, and respect for tradition still shapes Kinnauri weddings.

Table 1.2

Block	Villages	No. of Respondents	Changes in Engagement customs		Changes in Wedding Ceremony	
			Yes	No	Yes	No
Pooh	Jangi	40	0	40	35	5
Kalpa	Pangi	40	0	38	40	0
Nichar	Nichar	40	3	37	40	0

Source: Interview Schedule

According to the informants the traditional wedding ceremony of this society was very simple and unique. There was no tel, mehendi and haldi ceremony in this community. The wedding rituals are leaded by the village deity or monks (Lama's). The departure and arrival time of procession is decided by the local deity even the date of wedding is also decided by the local deity or monks. There is no swivel and vedi system in kinnauri wedding. In traditional wedding customs, there was no tent and shamiyana system and the bride and bridegroom both are wearing traditional attire only.

The above table shows that there are 40 respondents from each block of kinnaur district. Data also indicates that out of 120 respondents only three respondents have said that there is changes in customs of engagement in Nichar block. On the contrary, all the respondents have mentioned that there is some major changes in the wedding ceremony of scheduled tribe of Kinnaur, this includes, the mehendi, haldi ceremony and mangle sutra, varmala, sindoor and wearing of lehenga by the bride. In traditional wedding there is no role of mangle sutra and not the trend of pre wedding shoots, but before a decade the mangle sutra is included in the wedding ceremony and

even in the present scenario pre wedding shoots are also included.

It shows an intrusion of outer culture in the wedding customs of Kinnaura community.

5. Discussion

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► The wedding rituals are leaded by the village deity or monks (Lama's).

► The departure and arrival time of procession is decided by the local deity even the date of wedding is also decided by the local deity or monks.

► There is no swivel and vedi system in kinnauri wedding. In traditional wedding ceremony, there was no tent and shamiyana system and the bride and bridegroom both are wearing traditional attire only.

6. Conclusion

The engagement and marriage customs of the Kinnaura tribe demonstrate the dynamic interplay between environment, culture, economy, and law. While traditional practices such as fraternal polyandry, communal engagement rituals, and deity-led ceremonies once shaped social life, modern influences have ushered in new forms of marriage marked by individual autonomy, monogamy, legal validation, and cultural blending.

What emerges is not a rejection of tradition, but a fluid negotiation wherein the Kinnaura retain cultural identity while adapting to changing realities. The future of marriage in Kinnaur will likely be characterized by hybrid forms, preserving essence while modifying structure-reflecting the community's unique capacity for adaptation.

Suggestions for the Study

- Document traditional Kinnauri engagement and marriage rituals for preservation.
- Conduct cultural workshops to educate younger generations.
- Promote a balanced mix of traditional and modern practices.
- Ensure gender equality in all marriage customs.
- Spread awareness about legal rights and marriage registration.
- Support families who wish to follow traditional ceremonies.
- Reduce excessive spending and commercialization of weddings.
- Encourage further research in different regions of Kinnaur.
- Involve elders and religious leaders in guiding cultural practices.
- Strengthen dialogue between the older and younger generations.
- Promote eco-friendly, sustainable wedding practices.
- Use digital media to preserve and share traditional rituals.

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