

**Vrina Tradition in Western Himalayan Region
A Case Study of Mandi District of Himachal Pradesh**

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Abstract

The customary practice of Vrina was a social evil associated with the women. A few descriptions related with this practice are also found in the folklore of Mandi region of the Indian State of Himachal Pradesh. There are also some descriptions of this practice in some books on the history of Mandi. This customary practice prevailed not only in the studied region, but almost in every part of the western Himalayas. According to this customary practice, the poor parents accepted some money from the bridegroom's family in return of their daughter's hand in marriage. The aim of this article here is to do research on this tradition in Mandi region and how this tradition affected the society. Also, an attempt has been made to trace the connection between folk traditions and historical development related to Vrina.

Keywords

Balu- Nose ring

Barat- marriage party

Darbar- royal court

Lokgatha- folk ballad

Kanet- rajput caste of Hindu

Kant- beloved husband

Khar-a local unit of weight measurement

Phera- Sacred ritual to complete the marriage by which bride and bridegroom circling round the sacred fire in Hinduism.

Rathi- rajput caste of Hindu

Sahukar- moneylender

Vrina- form of marriage in which bridegroom purchases his bride from her parents

Introduction

Women have made significant contribution to the society, although their importance has not always been fully recognized. The status that women enjoy in a society might be considered an important indicator of its culture. Much of this, of course, depends on the particular period, place or people that are being studied. In a diverse, yet traditional society, such as that of Himachal Pradesh, cultural traditions and the social status of women would vary according to the variety of social conditions and other factors. Not only in Himachal Pradesh, but almost everywhere women have usually occupied a depressed social position and suffered neglect and demoralization. Before independence, the customary practices which were responsible for the miserable and unfortunate conditions of women in the region were chiefly early marriage, *sati*, *vrina* etc. *Vrina* was a form of ancient marriage system in the studied region wherein poor families used to marry their daughters in return for some money.

The Marriage system in most parts of the world has either had or still has been associated with monetary exchange made by one side to the other. Understanding the reasons behind the prevailing direction of these exchanges is important, as it has implications for the wealth distribution across families and could possibly affect how parents view the birth of a daughter versus a son.

Even though dowry and bride price (in lieu of some money, the betrothal of a girl took place after the groom side paid) are primarily decided by which side pays; the bride price agreed may or may not be intended to reflect the perceived value of the girl. The same culture may simultaneously practise both dowry and *Vrina*. Many cultures practised *Vrina* prior to existing records. In anthropological literature, bride price has often been explained in market terms, as payment made in exchange for the bride to her family. Such a custom prevailed in Mandi region as well as the other regions of Western Himalayas. In olden days or pre-independence period, the parents of a girl accepted bride price from the groom's family. Some people say that it was a kind of *saai* (advance payment) that bound the family of a bride to marry their daughter with a particular person. Some suggest that, if a person was agreeing to marry his wife to another man, then he took some money from the new husband of his wife. In Mandi region, such kind of tradition is also reflected in the local folklore. Possibly, *Vrina* may be seen as related to present-day customs in some societies of India of maintenance for the wife in the event of the breakup of marriage, and family maintenance in the event of the husband not providing adequately for the wife in his will. Another function performed by the amount was to provide a disincentive for the husband to divorce his wife: he would need to have a certain amount to be able to pay to the wife. In the princely states of Mandi and Suket, *Vrina* was a form of ancient marriage system, in which the poor parents of a young girl took some money from powerful people of the local area and married their young daughter with that person. The main reason behind this practice was poverty. The person to whom they married their daughter was often an aged person or sometimes old. Sometimes the young girls showed their resentment against this practice, but their feelings were suppressed. *Lauhala* was one of those girls who opposed this and finally committed suicide. She chose death instead of marrying an old man. This pathetic story of *Lauhala* and customary practice of *Vrina* were expressed through the local folklore. This particular form of marriage or *Vrina* practice prevailed in the local society for hundreds of years. From *The Gazetteer of Suket State* and *Gazetteer of Mandi State*, it is clear that this form of marriage was socially approved and also accepted by the State government authorities.

For the research work, considerable material has been obtained through personal interactions and field-work done in Mandi region. The efforts have been made to familiarize with the traditions prevailing in the area. During the field work, researcher has

found that individuals belonging to different sections of society in Mandi still retain a lot of information on *Vrina* tradition. The material so collected is correlated and analyzed. The government publications, books, identical studies in gazetteers are of substantial use. Some personal interviews of some singers of the *lokgatha* (folk ballad) have also been carried out. The study is conducted by applying both theoretical and empirical research, by engaging in survey studies and interaction techniques.

History

Bride price has its own history in all over the world. In many societies of the world such custom was prevailing in different forms and even today it is equally flourishing. In ancient Mesopotamia, the Code of Hammurabi mentions bride price in various laws as an established custom. It is suggested in the Code of Hammurabi that it is not the payment of the bride price that is prescribed, but the regulation of various aspects like as a man who paid the bride price but looked for another bride would not get a refund, but he would if the father of the bride refused the match or if a wife died without son, her father was entitled to the return of her dowry, minus the value of the bride price.

In Jewish tradition, the Hebrew Bible mentions the practice of paying a bride price to the father of a minor girl. The practice of the bride price is referred to in the Bible, in the Old Testament. Islamic law commands a groom to give the bride a gift called a *Mahr* prior to the consummation of the marriage. A *mahr* differs from the standard meaning of bride-price in that it is not to the family of the bride, but to the wife to keep for her; it is thus more accurately described as a dowry. It is mentioned in Quran that a woman (whom you marry) has full right to get *Mahr* which is obligatory bridal money from the side of her bridegroom at the time of marriage.

Islamic law considers it *haram* for a husband, the groom's family or the bride's family to take the *Mahr* of the bride without her wilful decision.

In parts of Africa, a traditional marriage ceremony depends on payment of a bride price to be valid. In African region bride price must be paid first in order for the couple to get permission to marry in church or in other civil ceremonies, or the marriage is not considered valid by the bride's family. The amount can vary from a token to a great sum.

Except all these, there are other societies like Thailand, China, New Popugenia and Central Asia where we find tradition of bride price.

The tradition of giving bride price was also practiced in many old princely states of Himalayan region.

A Case Study of Vrina Tradition in Princely States of Suket and Mandi (Modern Mandi District) of Himachal Pradesh

In keeping with the conditions in many other parts of India, the social position of women in Mandi region was not very good during pre-colonial and colonial times. Traditional practices and customs, that were particularly disadvantageous to women, prevailed in the region. Early marriage was one such custom. Women were not expected to have the freedom of learning to read and write. They were expected to remain entirely confined to work at home. Another social evil that affected the conditions of women in local society were *sati* and *Vrina* practices.

In Princely State of Mandi, the betrothal of the girl was arranged while she was still only a child, and the marriage took place at an early age of about 3 and 5 years. According to the *Gazetteer of Suket State*, the census report of 1921 shows that there were four girls below the age of four years who were married while another of the same age was a widow.

There were four main forms of traditional betrothal in Mandi and Suket States, which indicated the position of the female in her family. The first was *Dharmor pun*, in which the parents of the bride refused to take any payment from the bridegroom's family. It was rarely found among the agricultural and lower classes. The second was *Bata Sata* or exchange. In this form of marriage, there was an exchange of close family members of the bride and bridegroom with each other, without monetary transaction. In other words, it can be said that it was a kind of marriage, by which a series of exchange marriages were arranged among the relations of the bride and bridegroom respectively. The third type was *Gharjawantrior* labour. In this kind of marriage, a bridegroom had to labour or work at the home of bride, for seven to ten years in order to compensate his father-in-law. After the completion of his service he was permitted to marry his bride. Finally, there was *Vrina* or purchase which was the most common method to obtain a wife. Money was given to the parents of the bride. Sometimes young girls were forced into marriage with old men who were often four or five times their age. This was usually the case where there existed the practice of poor parents 'selling' their daughters to a person who could make a payment to them. In *The Gazetteer of Suket State*, it is stated that, 'in this form of marriage, up to the reign of Raja Ugar Sen the usual value in such cases was a sum of forty rupees in cash, one *khar* of grain and a couple of oxen, or if one had no oxen another twenty rupees in cash. With the rise in prices the sale value of the girls also increased. But now in order to stop this practice the *Durbar* have enacted that no unmarried girl shall be sold for over Rs. 200 and no widow shall be sold for over Rs. 250 and that anybody who sells a girl will have to pay a penalty of a fourth of the sale value of the girl to the *Durbar*.' Similarly, in the *Gazetteer of Mandi State*, 'At the present time the most usual method of obtaining a wife is by purchase. In the lower portions of the State the bride-price is already high and tends to increase steadily. The difficulty which *Rathis* and *Kanets* on the Kangra border experience in obtaining wives is, indeed, a matter of considerable social importance. They complain that the men of Kangra pay Rs. 300 to Rs. 400 for a Mandi girl and refuse to sell their daughters across the border. The consequence is that the supply of brides is not equal to the demand, while the price of those available is prohibitive for youths of straightened means. Executive action by the State is impracticable, but there is now a strong movement among the people themselves to bring social pressure to bear on fathers who trade for exorbitant profit in their daughters with residents of other tracts, and an attempt is being made to fix a customary price of about Rs. 100 for betrothals inside the State. The *Kanets* of the highlands are in a much better position. The *Vrina* or bride-price of a virgin is still nominal and rarely exceeds Rs. 15. That of a widow, or of a wife sold to another man, is high and sometimes reaches Rs. 300, but this is as it should be. It is to be hoped that the hill men will not be tempted from motives of avarice to sell their unmarried daughters to the highest bidder. The standard of honesty in the performance of matrimonial contracts is unhappily deteriorating, and the matter is one which is engaging the close attention of the State authorities. Strong action by the State is entirely in harmony with the views of the people, who are strongly opposed to allowing a betrothed girl a voice in the question as to whether she will, or will not; marry the man chosen for her.'

It is clear from above description given in the gazetteer of both states that, in the beginning of 20th century, in Mandi state, the bride price was fixed at hundred rupees by

state authorities, while in Suket it was Rs. 200. This practice was quite common and was prevalent in both Mandi and Suket.

In the Saraj valley of Mandi, however, the forms of marriage were slightly different than those followed in the flat valleys of Suket and Mandi region. There were four forms of marriages found in this region which were followed. *Bhyah* is a traditional form of marriage in which the bridegroom and his *barat* go to the bride's home and all the ceremonies are traditionally carried out. *Barni* is another form of marriage in which four or five family members of the bridegroom go to the bride's home and they bring her along with them. Sometimes, in the absence of the bridegroom, his younger or elder brother may go and bring her with them. In another form known as *Reet*, if a married woman wants to leave her husband and marry another man; her new bridegroom would have to pay some money to her ex-husband. And last is known as *vrina*, in this form of marriage the father of the girlsold her to the bridegroom for some money. About this practice the local people of the Saraj express their views in detail. According to Kishan Chand, a local resident of village Ghiyar of Saraj told that in olden days, *vrina* or marriage by purchase was one of the easiest methods to get a wife in Saraj. He correlates this practice with *Asur* which was one of the eight different forms of marriage recognised by the Hindu Law. Further he elaborates, in most areas of Saraj, only *vrina* practice took place. In this practice a day was fixed by both sides, the parents of the girl who accepted money and the bridegroom's family, which is of good omen for marriage. In this, on a particular day the bridegroom gave a *balu* (nose-ring) to the priest (who officiates for the bride's family), to put on the *balu* in bride's nose. The bride's father gave a feast to the relatives of both sides. In this marriage ceremony the lighting of *Shastras* was limited. Both in the Saraj and Chachyot, if a man and a woman could not be married owing to some astrological obstacles, the marriage rites were performed with a real brother of the bridegroom, but he had no claim on the wife whom he was formally married.

Among some of the *Kanets*, *Bhats*, *Kolis*, etc., and generally Saraj, marriages were not performed in the orthodox manner (*phera*) by circling round the sacred fire, but the simple rite of putting the *balu* (nose-ring) into the bride's nose was resorted to.

A vivid description of the social practice of *vrina* is also found in the popular folklore of Mandi region. Some folk ballads of the region reveal practices that were extremely discriminatory against women. Indian society has been patriarchal and male dominated since ancient times. Every important decision regarding the family as well as the society in general has always been taken by men. The consequences of such decisions were sometimes unfortunate for women. *Lahaulais* such *gatha* of this region that provides a glimpse of the miserable condition to which women were reduced by social circumstances.



Folk dance blended with popular ballad *Lahaula*

Lahaulais a very popular *gatha*. The story relates to a village called Pingla in the Sarkaghat area of Mandi. According to the recitation of the *gatha*, about 150 years ago, a social practice prevailed in the area. A description of this social practice is found in this particular *gatha* which depicts the situation of women in certain sections of society at that time.

Basoyeradhyarabapua
Juga jugaoyaadrehana mere bapua
Paarlidharate teen jane uttere
Aayi gai re lauhla jo rabarebapua
Basoyeradhyarabapua

Nahaaitaadhoi lauhala khoobsajaai tee
Sabhegaihnepahnaaikanesuhaganbanaai tee.
Mukhijaandedila re saarechaavbapua
Basoyeradhyarabapua.

Ekipaaselaareripaalki je sajdi
Doojepaase lauhala riarthi je sajdi
Aanjhuan de baggijaandeharbapua
Basoyeradhyarabapua.

Rokya jo kaharo maa pee lainapaani
Aapni lauhala jo lakri maa paani
Hunnkajorondata mere bapua
Basoyeradhyarabapua.

*Hunndekheyakhandelokodhiuaravarina
Mushkil hui jaandabetiyarajeena
Hatike nee pingle jo aunabaapua
Basoyaradhyara.*

This *gatha* tells us about a girl named Lahaula whose parents forced her to marry an old man who was four times her age. The parents of Lahaula were extremely poor and that is why they were compelled to accept a bride-price from an old man. She protested against this. On the day fixed for her marriage, her old groom was standing at her doorstep. But Lahaula left her house and preferred to commit suicide rather than marry the old man. Lahaula's rebellion against the wishes of her parents who were oppressed by poverty could only be expressed at the cost of her life.

Except Lahaula, there is another popular folksong, '*Kant ta merajhurirapardesa*', which tells us about this practice in the society of Mandi.

The song deals with the relationship between husband and wife and is about separation. This separation usually occurred because the husband had to migrate for work to earn a living. In fact, in most of the hilly areas, the husband has been shown to be away from his home and the woman (wife) is left to do all the work at home. The song is as follows:

*Kant ta meragairapardesa
assa ta rakhnamaildabhesa
Chitthinapatrina koi sandesa
kihan ye jindnabhani ho.
Jaliareetpurani ho.*

*Amma ta bapue khadi ravarina
kantameriya jo huirareena
Sahukarhundendanajeena
Kadhi ye massibatjaaniho
Jaliareetpurani ho.*

*Chaita, bhadobichdane o mukke
Chakkiapheri ne jindrisukke
Magha re pale jetha re dhupe
Dhooratebhardi main paniho
Jaliareetpurani ho.*

*Bakri, bheda, gaunachara
Bhukhinangimainkarongujara
Kant ruldapardesamera
Rondi ye jindnamaniho
Jaliareetpurani ho.*

The song, '*Kant merajhurirapardesa*' describes a social situation in which the husband had left his home in search of a livelihood. This seems to have been a very common picture of

the mountain areas including Mandi. As a result, the man who migrated temporarily for earning a living had to leave behind their wife in the village. For the woman (wife) who was left behind, life in the in-laws house was very hard and difficult. The song above describes not only the difficult daily situations of such women; it also deals with the social custom of *vrina*.

The song is about the unfortunate circumstances of the wife who lives a lonely life in the house of her in-laws. The songs describe her hard life and the difficult work she has to do every day. The wife recalls that it was by the *vrina* she had become his wife. By this system father of the girl accepted money for his daughter from the bridegroom. She laments that he had gone to another place due to which she was in poor circumstances. She had little food to eat and no good clothes to wear. She complains that her mother-in-law does not treat her well. The song clearly indicates the problems faced by women. The first was the *vrina* custom by which her husband gave bride-price to her parents. For this purpose, he took a loan from the moneylender and went to a distant place. The family was in great debt and she was unable to re-pay the money of the moneylender. This is the only reason, why she recalls again and again that this old tradition should be ended (*jalereetpurani*). Second was the fact that the husband had left his wife alone after marriage. None of the family members took care of her. In fact it was the wife who had to look after them. The song also suggests that a man married a girl, because there was no one to take care of his old parents and his household. Another helping hand was needed for his mother at his home. Thus the newlywed wife was left behind with the whole responsibility.

Above discussed *lokgatha*(folk ballad) and folk song of the region throw light on the customary practice of *vrina*. Poor economic condition was the main factor behind this practice. The people used to take money from money lenders but when they were unable to pay back the money; they used to marry their young daughters to these money lenders who were many times elder than the daughters of those poor people. Such an incident has been described in the *lokgathalahaula*.

Similarly if a person who wanted to obtain a wife through purchase system, he took loan on interest from the moneylenders. When he went outside for earning, the moneylender used to harass his wife for returning his loan. Thus the woman suffered badly from this practice. She either committed suicide or had to bear harassment at the hands of the moneylenders. The pathetic death of the girl and the hard difficulties faced by the women due to this practice touched the sentiments of people of the region. It made them think about getting rid of this evil custom. The creation of a *gatha* about this girl named Lahaula brought the issue of marriages of this kind to the forefront. This *gatha* began to be enacted as a tragic drama or a play in various places of the region and questioned the wisdom of such traditional practices. The practice of *vrina* became an important issue of discussion in the society. This gradually affected the thinking of the local people and brought awareness against this evil custom. With the passage of time, this social evil was gradually eradicated from the society.

Some people say that *Vrina* is a customary practice by which the parents of a girl child make a true promise with a known person or a family to marry their girl with their male family member. The family members often offered a lieu of money to the parents of girl child to ensure the promise. The parents accepted this money and they were bound to marry their daughter with the person. Such money was called advance and this practice was known as *Vrina*. But many times the society changed the main theme of *Vrina* practice. Sometimes poor parents sold their daughters for some money to the landlords or some other rich persons.

Conclusion

One important aspect characterizing marriages in Himalayan region was a monetary exchange made at the time of marriage between families involved. These exchanges could go in both directions – from the bride's family to the groom's, known as dowry, and vice versa, known as bride price. Whether this form was of Aryan origin or whether it was handed down from one generation to another by oral tradition, it differs fundamentally from the orthodox Hindu theory of marriage as a sacrament, in that it regards it as a civil contract terminable by the mutual consent of both parties. The Hindu idea that the wife is one-half of her husband's body is hardly existent in this State, except amongst the Rajputs and other castes which follow the customs of the plains. At a virgin's wedding religious rites were performed, but they were not essential in a widow's remarriage or in that of a woman purchased from a former husband. One of the unique characteristics of marriage system in Himalayan region was to purchase or vrina. Often a person, who wanted to have a bride, paid some amount of money to the parents of the girl and she became his wife. In other words it can be said that in ancient times, the parents used to sell their daughters to the rich or other powerful persons. The parents accepted money because of the poverty or other financial reasons. The one thing which comes out from the research is that perhaps there was inequality among the gender ratio and the numbers of the females in both States were low than the marriageable males. That is why the males of the society went through this practice. The custom was a curse for the women in this region. By this custom, the young girls were put to marry that person willingly or by force. Sometimes the bridegroom of the girl was four or five times her age or sometimes an old. This tradition or the form of marriage was socially approved by the people as well as the law of both states. The amount for bride price was fixed by the State authorities.

There was an unfortunate incident associated with this custom in which a girl protested against it and finally committed suicide. This pathetic story expressed in a *gatha Lauhala*, which is a part of folklore of Mandi, is still prevalent in the society and it throws light on the ill practice of vrina. Another famous folk song '*Kant merajhurirapardesa*' expresses complications associated with this custom. To conclude this article, in the end, it can be said that to obtain a wife through purchase was a big stigma on the society which was responsible for the miserable condition of females for a great extent in the region. However, after the incident described in the folk ballad *Lauhala* took place, society saw a gradual decline in this evil practice and it soon got eradicated from the society.

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