

The Polyandrous Jaunsari

Shared among brothers, a Jaunsari woman suffers multiple masters. With gender relations biased against women, single marriage norms need to be encouraged to mitigate the problem.

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Devani clasps young Amo's hand as she edgily makes her way down the steep rubble road of village Chabnu. Mother of six, Devani, easily past sixty, rests on a tree stump to catch her breath and beckons us to sit beside her. We choose some splattered slate and settle down. As issues of her failing health take a pause, we pose questions about her household. Matter of fact, she speaks of her three husbands and their eight common children.

Ghunam and his two elder brothers, own about 10 *bighas* of undulating land along the Yamuna. "Prime land," claims Ghunam, making his way down with a heavy plough strapped to his back. With a flick of his head, he indicates that Devani should follow. The dutiful wife, she leaves, sickle in hand and head scarf in place with little Amo trudging beside her. Of the many images that stayed with us during our survey of the mysterious mountainous Jaunsar Bawar



Since time immemorial the Jaunsari have nurtured a unique lifestyle with traditions and customs quite unlike any place in North India. Literature claims that the Jaunsari are live descendants of the legendary Pandava of the epic Mahabharata. That is perhaps why the people of Jaunsar share wives. Just as the five Pandava brothers had one wife, Draupadi, Jaunsari brothers too marry one woman. The Jaunsari women, however, confirmed the marriages, but remained unclear about the antecedents of the tradition. Swati, a young ninth grader, herding an errant goat, knitted her eyebrows when posed questions about having multiple husbands, and declared "such events are fewer now. I definitely will not marry more than one man. Besides I am planning to look for employment once I complete my studies." Perceiving the delight in our faces, she quickly rounded up her peers and happily prattled about their day to day living and remarkable customs.



The Jaunsari present a close knit structure, largely due to their polyandrous systems. Their intra information network works through muleteers who travel from village to village with their mules, *lohat*, transporting produce to the market. They come of use when carrying the old and ill to requisite destinations.

region along the border of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, this was perhaps the most profound.

Fair skinned, light eyed and exceedingly pretty, Jaunsari women, like other hill people are a happy and gregarious lot, offering tea and biscuits almost every hour. The villages dot the slopes where life is hard. In some villages drinking water during summer has to be fetched from distant springs. Their days are busy - grazing goats, collecting fodder for the cattle and fuel wood for homes, tending to the fields that largely grow maize, ginger and *arbi* (taro root) as cash crops, besides cooking, cleaning, caring for the child and more. Milking the cow and *ghee* and butter making also falls within the purview of female work quite opposed to norms in adjoining states where milking is undertaken only by a male member. The men also work, but their duties are labour oriented, ploughing fields within the village and mining outside it. The main source of livelihood of the Jaunsari still remains

agriculture, although the predisposition to move to cities or seek jobs is quite pronounced even among its women. Maize is the only grain crop. Prosperous riverine locations grow wheat, but with a subsistence production level it is not enough to be sold. Diet generally consists of maize, pounded into flour and rolled into unleavened thick *roti*, cooked lovingly over slow heat in an earthen stove, clarified butter - *ghee*, that exudes a nutty tantalising fragrance and a tangy sauce of crushed mint and forest berries. "The sauce and *ghee* is our specialty. Mint grows in abundance all along the slopes here, while we pick the berries from the forests. A senior officer who came to inaugurate the health camp two months ago, ate from our kitchens and was so impressed with the cuisine that he tipped my mother handsomely," says a proud 12 year old Geeta of Sahiya Village in Uttarakhand, beaming from ear to ear. Almost every household possesses livestock, principally goat and cattle, which sustains their need for *ghee* and milk.

Schools function systematically and consistently in the region. Almost every village has a primary school with local teaching staff. Children initially attend school regularly, but by level four begin to drop out of schooling. The girl child is withdrawn first, to help augment the family's work burden. More affluent, or higher caste women study till matriculation and aspire to study in colleges in the cities.

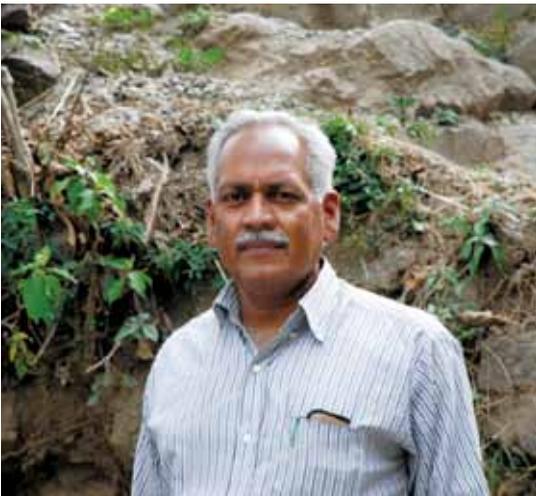


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On festive occasions local liquor is brewed by the men. Opposed by women, liquor making activities are now undertaken within the forested tracts. Inebriated men scurrying haphazardly is a common sight among these hills.

At Katli, Asha, a newlywed 18 year old, initially fenced off questions about the number of husbands she had, but relented later to admit that she indeed was married to two brothers. Although the marriage was not held against her wishes, as she was familiar with the *reet*, polyandry, she had hoped that sharing herself between brothers wouldn't be her fate. Once the barrier was down she turned refreshing candid and unabashedly revealed her reservations. "I don't like one of the brothers, he is rough, but there is nothing I can do," Asha piped.

Sipping *masala chai* by a gurgling stream in the village of Katli, we were awarded with more disclosures about the Jaunsari. A girl child is welcome. Although sex ratios of the districts of Sirmaur and Dehradun, are 901 and 893, respectively as per the 2001 Census, the story of hilly tracts is different. Here females exceed males, with nearly 1020 females, per 1000 males,



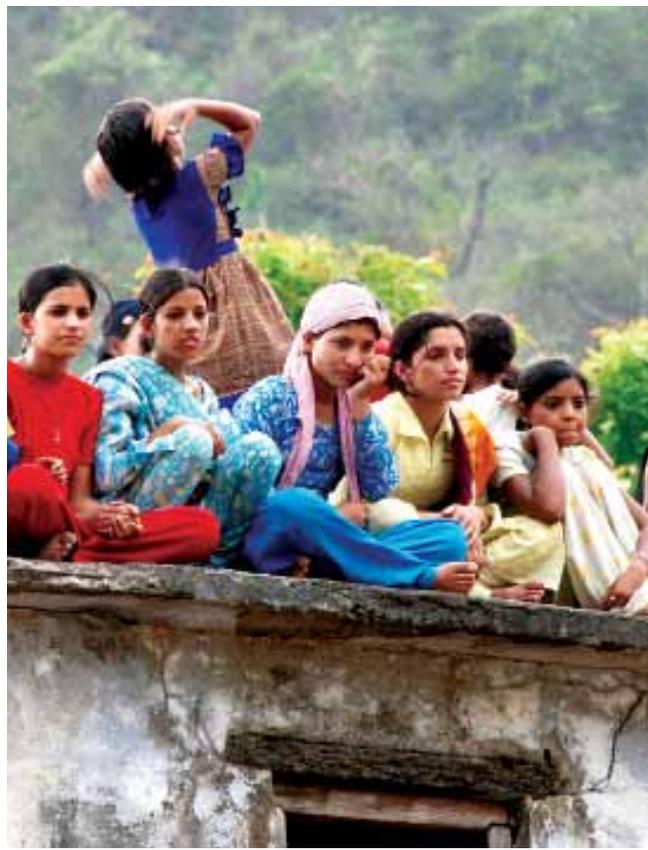
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as per our survey of ten villages flanking the border between Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. Even a generation ago, women were married at eleven or twelve, now marriages Anita insists, do not take place before sixteen. Sitting at the flanks, Vamta, a scruffy teenager adds in an undertone that girls from poor families are still married off early.

Divorce or *reet katna* is a fairly simple procedure among the Jaunsari and free movement of women, with her lord/owner's, '*larki ka malik*' consent is well documented. So liberal are their systems that ambitious 'owners' relocate their wives, handing them over to prospective grooms from different villages for a change of address that will enable a double or triple entry for the same job. Incidentally, women are well represented in the service sector in the region. The Himachal Jaunsari women are recruited at various levels by the State Government as *agaanwadi* workers, staff at Poanta Sahib Offices, teachers and various contract jobs. Incidents of wife juggling, on one end reveal the exploitative threads of the Jaunsari system, extremely skewed against the woman, and on the other show the need for a regular income.

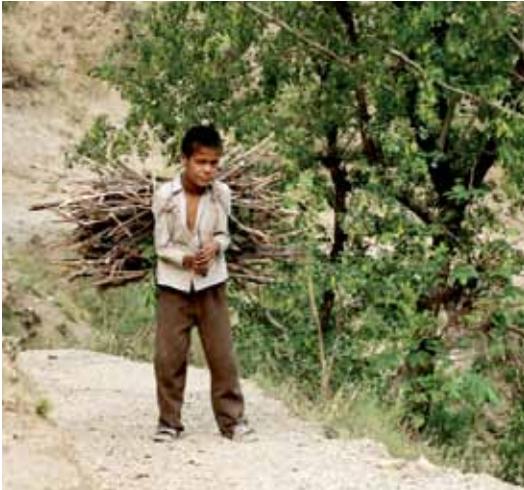
Traditional medicine systems are fairly strong in the region and women are aware of simple remedies. Cuts and bruises, minor burns, toothache and sprain are treated with foliage, flower or seed of particular herbs. "Every child in our village knows that the *banku* and *gandua* herbs can mend a cut in a jiffy," asserted Sunpa from Manal. However, reproductive health issues are severely under reported. A traditional midwife, *dai*, assists child birth and most of every other problem that a woman may encounter. Although the infant mortality rates are lower now than ten years ago - according to the recall period survey, 1 to 2 infants are lost against the 20 that are born every year, each village with sixty extended households on an average. This loosely falls into

Like the many tribes that inhabit the Himalayas, the Jaunsari too are fun loving people. Festivities are organised frequently, which is either a fair, or a sporting event. Young men and women gather to attend proceedings, dressed in their finest outfits. Interestingly, the Jaunsari, despite being considerably poor as compared to their counterparts in the plains, wear fashionable outfits that reflect the latest Bollywood styles. Blue is their favourite colour followed by red. Meeting places are often used for marriage negotiations. On the downside such gatherings are also used for trafficking, which is well pronounced in the area. Anita reported seasonal movement of young touts from the plains - making rounds and enticing young girls to join them in the city.



Cover Story

Environmental concerns The districts of Sirmaur in Himachal and Dehradun in Uttarakhand have several cement factories. Mining activities are rampant and one can easily spot torn slopes and friable debris along the road. The atmosphere is laden with heavy dust and despite the odd shower that drenched us mid afternoon the series of slopes that rose beyond village Kalsi remained shrouded. A young contractor working with a cement factory, Dilip, cites cases of improper blasting with inept detonation techniques that have made every road in the area including the village of Manal, where he resides, debris filled. As Sandeep Kumar, Sub Divisional Magistrate, Poanta Sahib, pointed out "Episodes of illegal quarrying are brought to my notice. Those caught face heavy fines and prosecution – but the hand in glove attitude of grass root agencies make detection difficult." Development, no doubt has its shortfalls.



an infant mortality ratio of 100/1000, way above the 66/1000 country average for rural areas as per the Sample Registration System (SRS) 2003. In Uttarakhand the closest hospital is in Sahiya and Chakrata, while in Himachal it is at Poanta Sahib. Some villages are so inaccessible that it takes a good four hour walk to reach the arterial connecting road where bus and jeep services are available. Addressing serious health issues from such a distance, through remote treacherous tracks is an onerous task. Most medical concerns related to long untreated reproductive tract infection, remain shuttered unless of course the situation turns life threatening. "Last month, I visited my maternal uncles. They live near the mountaintop in a very beautiful little village. The woman next door was pregnant and due for delivery. The *dai* was called, but it was a breech baby and was difficult to deliver. By the end of seven hours, the baby and its mother were both dead," said Swati sadly. Although relatively rare, such incidents still occur asserts her friends. Sanitation is another issue. Still forced to defecate in the forests, women rise

early to complete the task. Most homes already have bathing enclosures, but are unsure about placing a toilet within their precincts. With a strong taboo associated with defecation, women are comfortable to access the forests - unable to comprehend the extent of contamination that perpetuates through open defecation. Asked whether they have any knowledge of HIV/AIDS, most respondents replied in the affirmative. Although not exactly sure how it was transmitted, Swati asserted that "it does not spread if you shake hands, or eat with the infected person."

Our brief survey has amply pointed towards the need to encourage single marriages. Women in the region already lead a life of strife, without having to deal with multiple husbands. It is without doubt that further fragmentation of land holdings can be stalled in polyandrous regimes, yet this argument doesn't hold good anymore. With a systemised placement of functional school it should not be a problem to address the issue specifically and wipe it out in totality. **CV**