

REINFORCEMENT OF WIDOW WOMEN IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS FROM ANCIENT TO CONTEMPORARY TIMES

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Abstract

Widowhood reflects a long history of social, cultural and religious exclusion in different sections of society. Widow often suffer from stigma of being ominous, unlucky and so on. In Vedic Period respected position of widow is found. There hasn't any description of restriction and misrepresentation of widow is found in Vedic literature but in later Vedic scriptures the position of widow started to decline. Various Ancient texts restrict them to involve in any auspicious occasion, they are forced to eat simple food, wear white clothes only and even in some places widows are forced to shave their hair.

In this research we analyzed that during renaissance period social reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar tried to improve the condition by enacting legislations such as Abolition of Sati Act (1829), Widow Remarriage Act (1856).

In contemporary India, the upliftment of widows is no longer limited to remarriage; it should be included in various aspects such as education, socio inclusion, economic empowerment, social security, political participation, property rights, self-reliance, and a respectful life. Nevertheless, rural-urban disparity, caste divisions, religious orthodoxy, old age, poverty, and social stigma continue to act as major restriction in the rehabilitation of many widows.

Introduction

Widowhood has historically a significant occurrence in the social, cultural, and religious system of Indian society. How widowed are treated diversified across the historical epoch, varies across regions, caste strata and religious communities, broader transformations in family structures, gender relations, and social institutions of Indian social system. In traditional patriarchal society, a woman's purity was identified through her relationship with her husband, and widowhood often seen as ominous. Widowhood is the loss of social acceptance, economic stability, and personal autonomy. Widows often have to face various customs and restrictions such as social exclusion, denial of claim to inheritance rights, obligatory diet restrictions, prohibition on remarriage, and visible symbolic markers of mourning whenever they appear. In Hindu communities' practices of *Sati*, child widowhood, and enforced asceticism became prominent in certain historical contexts, especially among upper-caste Hindu communities. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, various social reformers Raja Rammohan Roy,

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phule started challenging the oppressive customary practices and started advocating for the abolishment of Sati, promoting widow remarriage and various women upliftment rights. Colonial legislation, including the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, laid the foundation of the legal reforms for widows in India, although social acceptance stayed limited. In contemporary India, constitutional guarantees, legal reforms, and welfare programmes are improving the formal status of widows, yet social stigma, economic security, and gender-based discrimination remained constant. Thus, understanding the historical evolution of widowhood is therefore essential for examining the intersection of gender, religion, caste, and social change in Indian society.

Review of Literature

The history of widowhood in India has attracted considerable scholarly attention from historians, sociologists, anthropologists, feminists, and gender studies scholars. Existing literature demonstrates that widowhood is not merely a personal life event but a socially constructed institution shaped by religion, patriarchy, caste hierarchy, property relations, and state intervention.

The historical writings of Uma Chakravarti provide an important feminist interpretation of widowhood. In *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens* (2003), Chakravarti argued that widowhood was made to be functional as a method to maintain caste purity and patriarchal control. She explained that the restrictions on widow remarriage, isolate sexuality, and out from inheritance rights were intended to regulate women's reproductive capacity and to preserve caste purity. According to her, patriarchy associated widowhood as a mechanism of social control.

The economic aspect of widowhood has been explored by Bina Agarwal. In her work *A Field of One's Own* (1994), Agarwal stated that women's ownership of land and property will improve the conditions of widow in family and make them arguable for their rights and freedom. She describes that widows without independent property will always be economically dependent to family members and vulnerable to exploitation. Her work shifted the attention of scholars towards the economic empowerment of women & inheritance rights within the family structure.

Methodology

This study mainly adopts a qualitative historical research design based on secondary data which analyses the changing patterns in the life of widowed women from the early Vedic to contemporary period. Data have been collected through rigorous study of secondary sources including from ancient texts to recent government and non-government data.

The objective of this study is to highlight the status of women in the early Vedic period followed by the struggle and the problems suffered by widowed women in the post Vedic Period to the empowerment and reinforcement of those women happened in the contemporary period.

Condition of widows across various timelines:

The Rigvedic period (approximately 1500 BCE–1000 BCE): It is considered the earliest stage of social and cultural development in Indian history. During this period, the development of family, marriage, religion, and social institutions was initially underway. Scholars generally believe that the status of women during this period was more respectable than in later societies. A. S. Altekar believes that women in Vedic society had the opportunity to participate in education, religious rituals, and social life. They could study the Vedas and participate in

yagnas. For this reason, many historians consider the Vedic period to be a period of relatively high social status for women.

The Institution of Marriage and Widowhood

In Vedic society, marriage was considered as religious rites, however, its purpose was not just limited to perform religious ritual but also to maintain the social and family life. In early Vedic literature it is not found that a woman's life being considered over if her husband died. This is why many scholars believe that at that time, there was no opposition to a widow re-entering social life.

Widows in the Rig Veda

The Rig Veda (10.18.8) contains a very important mantra that many scholars consider to be evidence of widow remarriage.

The mantra States :

"Arise, move away from this dead body and return to the world of the living."

According to historians, this mantra indicates that widows were expected not to renounce life but to resume normal social life. It is noteworthy that nowhere in this Vedic mantra is there any instruction to commit sati. Even the custom of *Niyog* was prevalent in ancient times to protect the dignity of women and to carry forward the lineage.

Social life of women portrayed in Rig Veda reveals a tolerant and unbiased society. In the Rig Vedic period, the situation of women was equal and equally respected like others. They had the right to take part in education, study the Vedas, and perform religious rituals. Female sages like Lopamudra, Ghosha, Apala, Vishvavara created Mantras which are testimony of women's scholarship and intellectual capacity. Marriage was generally a part of adulthood age and women had the right to choose their partners. Husband and wife were treated equally important in religious and social life. They also had important role to play in the decision-making process of the family and the society.

Thus, The Rigvedic period is known as a relatively egalitarian era in Indian history due to women's education, respect, rights, and social participation.

The Post-Vedic Period (1000 BC - 600BC): During this period literature and memorial literatures has started portray declining the freedom and status of women. Status of widows started declining and restrictions are being imposed. They are forced to eat simple satvik food, staying away from ornaments and luxurious lifestyle. The dominance of child marriage, and patriarchal system gradually increased.

During this period, the freedom of women was no longer sustained. Their role in religious rituals was no longer considered important and they are forced to be just the mother of their child and continue a household life. Birth of a male child was considered more important in this period and daughter's social situation weakened over time. Although, *Pardah* system was not prevalent in this period, still women's social participation was comparatively decreased.

However, women continued to be respected within the family as the presiding deity of the household, mother and wife, and were regarded as the conservator of family's moral culture and religious values. Despite having the domestic respect, their social role, educational opportunities and legal social rights gradually diminished. Thus, the Post Vedic period marked a decline of women's freedom, equality and social status, which became the foundation for the restrictive situation of women in the medieval Indian Society.

Medieval Period (12th century – 18th century): The status of widows reached to its lowest position. Wars Widowhood was considered as a curse. The women who want to survive should have shaved their hairs and required to wear white clothes and they are restricted to attend auspicious occasions.

In the medieval period women suffered a significant decline in their social position. Due to the Political and social transformations interacted with existing patriarchal structures and influenced the position of widows differently across regions and communities.” that created restrictions on women's freedom and rights. The practices such as purdah (veil system) child marriage, sati, and polygamy became more widespread in most of the regions and community. Access of education and public life was greatly snatched from women and their primary role was converted into household responsibility, marriage and motherhood.

Widow went through severe social discrimination. Widow remarriage was strongly discouraged and prohibited in many regions and on the other hand Sati got accepted in many regions. In this period women had very limited right to property and along with the right to speak for their own. Their participation in religious rituals have also declined significantly.

Modern Era and British India (19th century to 1947): In 19th century social reformers tried hard to improve the condition of widows. Efforts of Raja Rammohan Roy brought some positive remarks as British Governor-General Lord William Bentinck outlawed the Sati System in 1829 by Abolition of Sati Act 1829. Widow Remarriage Act (1856) was passed as a result of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's movements for the re- marrying of widow women and including them into mainstream society, the 'Hindu Widow Remarriage Act, 1856' was passed, which gave legal recognition to widow remarriage. Establishment of Ashrams: Maharshi Dhondo Keshav Karve established the 'Anath Balika Ashram' in Pune for the education and housing of widows and set an example for society by marrying a widow himself.

Contemporary India (after 1947): After independence Indian government bring various laws and schemes to empower widows. Self-help groups and NGOs are also helping them to bring them to mainstream society. Today, the situation of women is far better then that of the post Vedic and medieval times. The Indian Constitution had provided different rights to women for their betterment and empowerment. Better educational opportunities for all, globalization, urbanisation and women empowerment programmes are the very reasons for the social, economic and political participation of women that we see today.

Today, women are actively participating in the fields like education, science, medical, administration, politics, military, sports, business, media and industry. Reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj system has strengthen the role of women in the decision-making system. Along with the government schemes and constitutional provisions, several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have also played crucial role in the empowerment of women.

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), founded in 1972 by Ela Bhatt is one of the India's largest organisations working for women in the informal sector. It focuses on women's economic empowerment through employment, financial inclusion, skill enhancement, healthcare, safety and security.

Sulabh International, established in 1970 by Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, works to improve sanitation, hygiene, women's dignity and social justice. It has also significantly contributed to eliminate manual scavenging, construct hygienic toilets and rehabilitating women from marginalized communities through education and skill development trainings.

Jagori, founded in 1984, focused on women's rights, gender equality, safety, and prevention of gender-based violence and discrimination. It focuses on conducting awareness campaigns, legal literacy programmes and community-based initiatives for women and girls.

CARE India works towards the improvement of women's health, nutrition, education and financial stability through community development programmes, especially in rural and marginalised areas.

Breakthrough India, an organisation that works to eliminate gender-based discrimination, violence against women, sexual harassment, child marriage through media campaigns, educational campaigns and youth engagement.

Mahila Samakhya programme was although initiated by the Government of India, it collaborates with the NGOs to promote women's education, leadership, legal awareness and empowerment specifically among rural women.

Key legal frameworks governing widow women in India include:

- Hindu Succession Act, 1956: This landmark legislation grants widows absolute rights to inherit their deceased husband's property alongside his children and mother. The 2005 Amendment further solidified women's inheritance rights across the board.
- The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856: This act legalized the remarriage of Hindu widows and provide them the legitimacy of children born from these unions.
- Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956: The act ensures a widow's right to maintenance from her husband's estate, and notably, provides that a widowed daughter-in-law may claim maintenance from her father-in-law under certain circumstances.
- Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005: Provides critical protection against domestic abuse and specifically guarantees a widow's right to reside in the "shared household" or matrimonial home, preventing illegal eviction by in-laws

Constitutional Provisions

- Article 14 (Right to Equality): It ensures that each individuals, including widows, must be treated equally before the law and are protected from discriminatory social norms and customs.
- Article 15 (Prohibition of Discrimination): It empowers the State to create special provisions and welfare schemes specifically for women and children.
- Article 21 (Protection of Life and Personal Liberty): It guarantees right to live with human dignity, protecting widows from degrading treatment or the deprivation of their livelihood.
- Article 39(a) (Adequate Means of Livelihood): Directs the State to ensure that all citizens, including widows, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood.
- Article 41 (Right to Public Assistance): Directs the State to provide public assistance in cases of old age, disablement and other Cases

Conclusion

This historical research has showcased that the life of widow from the ancient to the contemporary period has survived a lot and struggled a lot for their rights, and control over their own lives. From early freedom fighters to contemporary feminist scholars, all of them fought for widow and their rights in one way or another.

This research not just provides us with the facts related to women, widow and their lives but also how the society has introduced the concept of widowhood back then based on their own stereotypical understanding. These rites, rituals and customs followed by the widows were

obliged to them most of the time with or without their consent. For example; Sati, one of the most criticized practises that was overthrown by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, was so brutal but deeply ingrained in the society that widows were forced to burn alive with their dead husband. "The history of widowhood demonstrates a complex process of continuity and change across ancient, medieval, colonial and post-independence India rather than a simple linear transition from oppression to empowerment.

Ultimately, the history of women can be best understood as a changing process of negotiation, resistance, adaptation and transformation. Women have started exercising agency and overthrown the cultural constraints contributing to religion, literature, education, politics and social reforms.

As India continues to foster constitutional democracy, the realization of the struggles of women, especially widows and providing them with the best support emotionally and legally remains both a historical and national imperative.

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