

The 'Living' Sati

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Abstract – This paper seeks to bring forth the conditions of the widows in India – how they are forced to live their life after becoming a widow, their lifestyle changes, their identity crisis and of course their socio-economic deprivations. Though we have finally succeeded in abolishing 'sati' from our country, still certain heinous activities surrounding the widows continue, which are no less pathetic than sati. The paper highlights certain incidents in Varanasi to get an idea of the lifestyle crisis of these widows. Certain associated questions are also raised which ultimately demand a review of the Hindu society, culture and practices on an urgent basis. Whatever the crisis is, solutions are sought both nationally and at international level. Rays of hope are there through certain institutions and organisations which are also brought at the lime light. Thus, the paper tries to unfold the plight of the Hindu widows in India, which is in a sorrowful state, making the conditions comparable with 'living sati'.

Index Terms – Widows, Sati, Hindu Religion, Patriarchy, Matriarchy.

In most organized religions of the world, women have not enjoyed equal rights with men. The norms assigned to them by male religious authorities have subjected them to various forms of marginalization. A major challenge for religious communities across the world today is to ensure that their religious practices and values are compatible with the ideal of gender equality as an aspect of the ideology of social justice, which is being widely upheld across the globe. Many religious communities have begun to re-evaluate and modify the social norms they have held for centuries in light of this ideology. The modification of social norms involves a re-interpretation of religious texts in reference to whose authority the norms were established. Defining women's roles is an area in which the need for such modification has been most acutely felt. Though every effort has been given for such modifications and upliftments, still there has remained such sensitive areas, which needs immediate attention. A case study from Hindu religion may be appropriate to understand the position of women in Hindu society.

The position of women in Hinduism is widely dependent on different Hindu texts and certain contexts. While positive references to ideal women are there in texts such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, some texts such as Manu-smriti advocate a restriction of women's right. Again, Shaktism, focuses worship of the goddess Devi as the supreme embodiment power, or shakti. In some instances, such as with Gauriya Vaishnavism, specific emphasis is placed on the worship of God's female aspect (Radharani) even above that of her paramour Krishna. In Hindu social and ethical texts, women often seem to be hierarchically inferior to men. Every time a girl is governed by her father, a married woman by her husband, a widow by her sons.

Perhaps the greatest expression of the Hindu patriarchal society is found through the institution of marriage. Though the concept of marriage is considered as one of the most sacred practices in the Hindu society, but ironically it brings with it the most - evil by-product. The Hindu society believe that the bond of marriage should survive even after the death of the husbands. Therefore, they discovered a practice like sati which made the bonding permanent, even after death. But the responsibility of surviving the bond was vested to the women only, men were not burdened with such practices. Ironically, males were not believed to have such physical and mental strength to withstand a practice like sati.

The Aryans, upon their invasion in India in 1500 BC, introduced the horrific custom of sati i.e. the burning of a woman after the death of her husband. Historically, the practice of sati was to be found among many castes and at every social level, chosen by or for both uneducated and the highest - ranking women of the times. The common deciding factor was often ownership of wealth or property, since all possessions of the widow devolved to the husband's family upon her death. In a country that shunned widows, sati was considered the highest expression of wifely devotion to a dead husband. It was deemed an act of fearless piety and was said to purge her of all sins, release her from the cycle of birth and rebirth and ensure salvation for her dead husband and the seven generations that followed her. Because its proponents lauded it as the required conduct of righteous women, it was not considered to be suicide, otherwise banned or discouraged by Hindu scriptures. Stein (1978) states "The widow on her way to the pyre was the object (for once) of all public attention..... Endowed with the gift of prophecy and the power to cure and bless, she was immolated amid great fanfare, with great veneration". Only if she was virtuous and pious would she be worthy of being sacrificed; consequently, being burned or being seen as a failed wife were often her only choice (Stein 1978). It is little wonder that women growing up in a culture in which they were so little valued as individuals considered it as the only way for a good wife to behave. The alternative, anyway, was not appealing. After the death of a husband a Hindu widow was expected to live the life of an aesthetic, renouncing all social activities, shaving her head, eating only boiled rice and sleeping on thin coarse matting. To many, death may have been preferable, especially for those who were still girls themselves when their husbands died.

Most recorded instances of sati during the 1800's were described as 'voluntary' acts of courage and devotion, a conviction that sati advocates continue to promote to this day. At the very least, women committing sati were encouraged by priests (who received the best item from the women's possessions as payment), the relatives of both families (who received all the women's remaining possessions and untold blessings) and by general peers. Whatever the pictures were, sati was actually a cruel custom born out of the belief that a woman have no intrinsic value without her husband and that she had no duty and no justification to exist once he passed away.

But two things need to be noted here. Firstly, a contemporary religion like Islam was rather liberal in this respect. Scope of remarriage and legal share in property was granted to Islam women after the death of their husbands. Perhaps, the most obvious motive of social rejection of Hindu widows and encouraging the practice of sati was to ensure the family property. Hindu law never granted any right to property for women, more so to the ones without their legal masters, the husbands.

Secondly, Hindu society went into a contradiction due to the practice of sati. On one hand, Hindus believed that human life is very precious, which is attained after hundreds and thousands of births and provides a unique opportunity to each individual to make a quantum jump into higher planes of existence or attain immortality. On the other hand, the same Hindu society entertained a practice like sati. But, the Hindu society justified sati on the ground that it is an act of self - sacrifice of the highest kind, thereby fulfilling the wife's final and the most sacred responsibility. The reality always remained unidentified. It was actually practiced by vested family members to get rid of unwanted women or resolve inheritance problem.

Thanks to some of our social reformers, who have put in their earnest effort to abolish a heinous practice like sati. In 1811, Raja Rammohan Roy witnessed his brother's widow being burned alive on her husband's funeral pyre. Three years later, he concentrated on campaigning against the practice of women dying as sati. Raja Rammohan Roy was the first Indian to protest against this custom. In spite of protests from orthodox Hindus, he carried on his propaganda against the custom. Finally, he won the cause when Lord William Bentick, the Governor General of India passed a law in 1829 abolishing the custom of sati. According to this law the custom of sati became illegal and punishable as culpable homicide.

The Hindu religion got reformed, the Hindu society became modern, the Hindu widows got relieved, as situation changed. But did it change really? The abolition of sati, brought with it a new alternative in the form of 'Living Sati'. The life of Hindu widows entered into a new tale of horror, deprivation and crisis. A case study from Varanasi will be relevant in this context. Varanasi, even today remains as one of the most important Hindu pilgrimages. It offers purification of our mind and liberation of our soul. Does it offer the same remedy to those innumerable Hindu widows who have shown unconditional faith and belief to the Hindu religion and the place itself?

An analysis can start with – who are the widows? What precisely are their problems? And of course, how is the life in Varanasi for them?

Widowhood is a state of social death. Widows in India have a pronoun problem. The estimated 40 million women widows in the country go from being called 'she' to 'it', when they loose their husbands. They then become 'de-sexed' creatures. It can be said that there is no group more affected by the sin of omission than widows. They are painfully absent from the statistics of many developing countries, and they are rarely mentioned in the multitude of reports on women's poverty, development, health or human rights published in the last twenty-five years. They are therefore suffering from an 'identity crisis' as they themselves have become an 'invisible' group.

Across a wide range of cultures, widows are subject to patriarchal customary and religious laws and confront discrimination in inheritance rights. Many of these widows suffer abuse and exploitation at the hands of family members, often in the context of property disputes. Few cases proceed successfully through the justice system, perpetrators go unpunished, while others remain undeterred and undetected. Even in countries where legal protection is more inclusive, widows suffer from the loss of social status and marginalization. Today, millions of widows, of all ages, endure extreme poverty, ostracism, violence, homelessness, ill health and discrimination in law and custom. A lack of inheritance and land rights, widow abuse and the practice of degrading, and life-threatening mourning and burial rites are prime examples of human rights violations that are justified by 'reliance on culture' and 'tradition'.

India has the largest recorded number of widows in the world — estimated 46 million in 2015. Remarriage is the exception rather than the rule; only about 10 per cent of widows marry again. India is perhaps the only country where widowhood, in addition to being a personal status, exists as a social institution. Widows' deprivation and stigmatization are exacerbated by ritual and religious symbolism. Indian society, like all patriarchal societies, confers social status on a woman through a man; hence, in the absence of a man, she herself becomes a non - entity and suffers a social death. Sati is the ultimate manifestation of this belief. Widow remarriage may be forbidden in the higher castes, and remarriage, where permitted, may be restricted to a family member. Further, a widow, upon remarriage, may be required to relinquish custody of her children as well as any property rights she may have. If she keeps her children with her, she may fear they will be ill-treated in a second marriage. Indian widows are often regarded as 'evil eyes', the purveyors of ill fortune and unwanted burdens on poor families. Words in the vernacular are crudely pejorative : 'witch', 'dakan' and 'whore'. Thousands of widows are disowned by their relatives and thrown out of their homes in the context of land and inheritance disputes. Their options, given a lack of education and training, are mostly limited to becoming exploited, unregulated, domestic labourers (often as house slaves within the husband's family) or turning to begging or prostitution.

The sexual and economic exploitation of widows, abandoned by their families to the temple sites such as Mathura, Varanasi and Tirupati, has been sensationally documented in the media. Thousands of India's widows live in abject poverty and degradation in these centres. In Vrindavan alone, an estimated 20,000 widows struggle to survive. Younger widows are forced into prostitution, and older ones are left to beg and chant for alms from pilgrims and tourists.

Situations in Varanasi is actually painful. It was found widows sitting on the banks of the river Ganga at the entrance of the Vishwanath temple holding a small broken bowl in their frail hands begging for alms. The management of the *Dharmshalas* at Varanasi were found to be in the hands of a few influential people and very little of the funds that they received by way of donations went to these unfortunate widows. Most widows were asked to attend an evening prayer and spend their time begging on the various ghats, Dasaswamedh ghat being a focal point. It was seen that none of them actually received financial assistance from their relatives and were completely at the mercy of the *Dharmshalas* or donors.

Along the bank of the river, several women were found alone and in groups begging for help. Those still in workable conditions, would be taken for domestic help and others live in religious havens, ashrams or maths but the majority lived alone in search of shelter particularly under a plastic sheet or a small rented room. Widows beg sitting on the steps of the Dasaswamedh ghat and there were some waiting for death.

Many of these widows were not from the poor and backward section of the Indian society, but came from well to do families, which could have supported them. A good number approximately 60% to 65% women were Brahmins from well to do families. On further questioning, many of these I found, was because they were not welcomed in their own homes that they had to come here. Spirituality was not the real reason, even though claimed it to be.

Still there are some rays of hope also. One such is Asha Bhavan (House of Hope). Asha Bhavan is a residential home for destitute widows. Asha Bhavan director Mr. Tiwari said that "in 1997 God spoke to us about the widows of Varanasi. He told us to build a home for them where some can live in dignity and others can come to earn a living".

The vision of the home is to help these widows by housing 50 of them who are in desperate circumstances, to help them and the children who often accompany them. They also want to equip 1500 younger widows with marketable skills, so that they can earn a decent income and experience the Hope that they never had.

Asha Bhavan director also added that, "we know this will take time, a lot of staff, finances and knowledge. We have built the home and have started taking in widows. As widows are very much on God's heart, we are committed to showing and telling them the message of His love and teaching skills which will enable them to return to society. We see the widows as individuals, precious in the eyes of God and we want to treat them with that same respect – not as mere numbers in an institution. Our goal is to have 50 widows living in our home. We want to house widows who are currently living on the streets – especially those who are sick, disabled or have mental problems. Widows come daily to learn and earn through various micro - enterprises like handicrafts, tailoring, soap making, candle making, baking, peanut butter and jam making, and jewellery making. All these products are sold in a shop in front of the widows' home, and at other locations as well. In this way we have started Hope Arts, a Dutch Bakery, and many other microenterprise shops".

Today there are 25 widows living in the home. The home has trained and employed almost 100 widows in various income-generating projects and has opened a small shop for selling some of their products. Hope Arts sells jewellery, paper products, baked goods and other items. All products are handmade by the widows at Asha Bhavan, in Varanasi, India. Hope Arts trains and employs widows who make and sell products for which they get a fair payment. Jewellery items like necklaces, bracelets and earrings are available in the home. These are nickel-free, silver-plated and often made with semi-precious stones or glass beads.

Hope Arts also sells paper items like notebooks, postcards and stationary packets. The paper used is wood-free, hand made from fresh or recycled items like banana peels, rice skin, silk, old cotton or hay. *The Dutch Bakery and Coffee Shop* has daily fresh and foreign baked products like white bread, brown bread, buns, muffins, cakes, cookies and brownies-both vegetarian and non-vegetarian items. Next to the bakery there is a nice coffee shop with coffee, tea and other beverages. The Dutch Bakery is also known for the most delicious peanut butter in India.

Widows dwelling in Varanasi got an opportunity to share a common platform with Hindu seers and scholars in an event organised by Sulabh International at Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapeeth (MGKV) on 29th May, 2013. Widows from different parts of the country who are living in shelter homes and ashrams in Varanasi shared food with them. MGKV vice-chancellor Prithvish Naag was the chief guest.

"It was aimed to create awareness against the practice of widowhood in the country. Such kind of programmes will help to end this treatment", founder of Sulabh International Bindeshwar Pathak said. He sought support of Hindu seers and saints and Sanskrit pundits to oppose widowhood.

"I feel time has come for the government to enact a law for the welfare, protection and well-being of widows so that their living conditions and general existence are improved", Pathak said. Pathak pointed out that by his own experience of working for the widows he firmly believes that the enormous sufferings and hardships the widows in India continue to face can only be changed by drafting a law.

Sulabh International, a well-known NGO, on 28th April, 2013, adopted 150 widows living in Varanasi and launched a campaign against “widowhood” in the country. These widows will be given a monthly stipend of ₹2,000 each and will be entitled to other welfare facilities.

Sulabh founder Bindeshwar Pathak announced on the banks of the Ganga river that he would launch a nationwide campaign to create awareness against the age-old traditions that bind widows in chains and subject them to social ostracism. An estimated 40 million of the world’s widow live in India. The United Nation General Assembly declared on June 23, 2011, the first-ever International Widows’ Day and the day has been celebrated annually. Former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, in a statement said, “No women should lose her right when she loses her husband, but an estimated 115 million widows live in poverty, and 81 million have suffered physical abuse. Girls married to much older men are especially vulnerable. Let us use International Widows’ Day to advocate for the rights of all widows so they can enjoy better lives and realise their great potential to contribute to our world”.

Amidst such care, sympathy, help and of course charity, two important points have been observed and virtually two related questions can be raised. Firstly, the women, may be under force, are moving towards such a life where she has been denied any main stream cum male stream identity. She is recognised not as someone’s daughter, someone’s wife or someone’s mother. Rather, she is she. She is a widow, not a woman. At least for them the suffix ‘man’ is meaningless. The public – private dichotomy does not find any meaning in their life.

Secondly, the Hindu religion has vested in them the most sacred responsibility of protecting the religion itself. It is the Hindu women who carries the symbol of married life, at the same time bears the pain and symbol of widowhood. It is the widows who have been recognised by the Hindu society as the most trust worthy section of the Hindu religion. The males are free from such religious orthodoxies.

The two points raised here are tied to two separate questions. Firstly, since the Hindu widows are habituated to live in a community cum society which carries with it no male identity, one can definitely hope for a slow growth of matriarchal society. Now the question is – **Is the Hindu society ready to accept such a matriarchal dominance?** The Hindu patriarchal society has something to fear about. Traditionally, it is the Hindu male who has given the female the much-needed identity. But it is only because of their orthodoxies and religio-economic harassment that the widows are forced to search an alternative identity. They started recognizing themselves independently. It is definitely a thing of joy for the feminists that the age-old Hindu patriarchal society has dug its own graveyard. The segregation and marginalisation of these widows have helped them find an alternate living. It is new in concept, sacred in outlook, independent in thought and definitely matriarchal in essence.

Secondly, a doubt cum question is raised from a more religious point of view. **Does the Hindu religion find the women more trustworthy to protect its religious sanctity than men?** It is evident from the fact that the Hindu religion has exempted the men from carrying out all sorts of religious symbolism. The main/male stream Hindu society can come out with a different explanation of it all together. But the thing which is definitely of greater value to the feminists is that, at least the Hindu females are religiously more reliable than their male counterparts. This also takes us to the beginning of the paper where the Hindu goddesses have resembled women in the form of Kali and Durga and forced the Hindu religion to vest unconditional devotion to them.

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