



ROLE OF SOCIAL REFORMERS FOR THE UPLIFTMENT OF WIDOWS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT :

This Research article is an attempt to highlight the extensive role played by Social reformers for the upliftment of widows in India. Widows were known by several terms in Vedic, Sanskrit literature and in different dictionaries as Avira, Randa, Yati, Yatni, Nishphala, Vishwasta, Katyayani, Mritbhartika, MritPatika and Jalika. In ancient India, 'Vidhwa' word is believed to have been used after the death of her husband. The Widow was compelled to lead a forlorn life. She was deprived of the minimum comforts of life. She had to live on one meal a day, sleep on the floor and could not wear the coloured clothes. If she happened to be less than 20 years of age, she was allowed to wear a white sari with a small border.



KEYWORDS : Vedic, Sanskrit literature , small border.

INTRODUCTION:

She cooked her vegetarian food in a separate kitchen, kept regular fasts on prescribed days, was not allowed to be present at auspicious functions in the family. She was not allowed to stir out of the house alone or receive any male guests to house. The treatment of the widow was completely un controversial in Indian society. The plight of widows was hardly mentioned in literature, in public debates, in social policy or even by the women's movement. The colonial encounter opened up the issue of enforced widowhood. However, a new voice was beginning to be heard, that of the educated Indian women, as Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai both from Maharashtra. Tarabai Shinde's writings started debate in the nineteenth century in Maharashtra. Similarly, Ramabai poured scorn on the reformers, who took oaths that they would marry widow, but no sooner were they confronted with actual situations, they went off and married 'pretty little maidens'. Pandita Ramabai as a widow provided the most structured critique of women's oppression during her day. By the end of nineteenth century, the products of Bethune school, other women's educational institutions were marking their presence felt in the Bengal's cultural fields. It is estimated that 190 odd women authors from 1856 to 1910 produced about 400 works including poems, novels, plays, essays and autobiographies. Writings on widowhood created a new public sphere in which the widow became a distinctive category among women. Widowhood, created a matter of serious debate, questioning the orthodox belief and customs.

Ram Mohan Roy the first great modern reformer, who had questioned orthodox belief and opposed Sati. He had extolled the virtues and self men restraint of Indian widows in leading lives of continence and chastity dedicating themselves to the memory of their dead husbands. Widow Remarriage Movement with

which the names of some of the great social reformers of Modern India like Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Pandit Bishnu Shastri, were associated, did not appear all of sudden in the middle of the nineteenth century. They had some minds feeling by making provision for Widow remarriage. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was able to get an Act passed in 1856, where by Widow remarriage was legalized. The first remarriage of a widow took place on 7th December, 1856 in Calcutta, when Kalimati Debi, was married to Shri Chandra Vidyaratna after the Widow Remarriage Bill was made into an Act in 1856. Even Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar set an example by marrying his first son to a widow. The girl was widowed, when she was only six years old. He also bore the expenses in connection with widow marriages and provided for the maintenance of married couples and their families in a number of cases. The Act did not receive the required publicity and as such remained on the statute book. The outbreak of 1857 hindered the progress of the reforms. Vidyasagar failed to see many widows remarried, because of the difficulties of translating unwavering commitment and social consciousness into practice in the absence of a social milieu willing to carry it forward. However, Bengal was the bridgehead of reform in the early part of the country.

In Madras Presidency, Kandukkuri Veersalingam Pantulu, started the Rajahmundry Widow Remarriage Association in 1878. Veeresalingam Pantulu celebrated a marriage of a Brahmin widower and a young widow on 13th December, 1881 in Rajmundry town. This caused a lot of excitement. Eventually, the majority of the prominent citizens of Rajmundry joined Veeresalingam's Widow Remarriages Association. G.Subramaniya Iyer the editor of The Hindu Newspaper married his widowed daughter Sivapriyammal in the Bombay session of the Indian National Congress held on 31st December 1889. It was celebrated at the house of Mahavadhass Raghunathadhass, a great social reformer of western India.

In western India, first widow remarriage was celebrated in Bombay in 1869. However, about the year 1853, Raghunath Janardan, a Gaud Brahmin by caste and clerk in the municipal office at Ahmadabad, married a widow named Chimabai. As his first wife was then living, this marriage was not hailed by the reformers. Another marriage took place thirteen years after this, the bride was a Gujarati lady named Diwal Bai. However, from 1840 onwards, many local reform group, were started by the students of the Elphinstone Institution founded in 1827. In this early age, two personalities were Gopal Hari Deshmukh, known as Lokahita-wadi and his friend, Jotiba Govind Phule of low caste, took up this fight against Brahmanic oppression. Phule started a home for women and children. Like Ishwar Chandra in Bengal, Bishnu Shastri's work started his work in Bombay in the year 1866 with the cooperation of several educated Indian like Bal Mangesh Wagle, K.T. Telang, M.G. Ranade, Janardan Sakharam Gadgil, Gopal Hari Deshmukh, Balaji Pandurang, Shantram Narayanan, N.M. Paramanand, B.H. Bhagavat and A. V.Kathcvti. The cause of this movement, was greatly advanced.

In 1869, Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade joined the Widow Remarriage Association, founded in 1861. He wanted to encourage female education and oppose child marriage, but his personal world located between tradition and modernity, was fraught with moral ambiguity. In the meantime, many Caste Conferences and Caste associations, were organized, which had their heyday from the 1880s to the 1930s and many Caste Associations championed for the cause of remarriage of widow. By the end of the nineteenth century, widow remarriages also began to take place greater degree in Gujarat and Maharashtra rather than in Bengal. It was revealed that from 1860 to 1901, 138 widow remarriages took place. The number of remarriages was very meagre, but the beneficial effect of widow remarriage could not be exaggerated. Meantime, the northern India produced a real 'Hindu Luther', Dayanand Saraswati whose reform work was to have the deepest and most lasting effect. Pandita Ramabai, Rukhmabai, Rokeya Hossain, Other less, rebellious women, utilized familial support and educational reforms.

The efforts of Ramabai met with little support from early reformers. Her school for widow attracted some high caste Hindu widows. Among them Godubai, renamed Anadibai after her marriage to D.K. Karve joined in this school. The Hindu community generally remained suspicious of Ramabai's motives. The newspaper 'Kesari' charged her with converting widows to Christianity. All these developments forced her to move the school to Poona. By 1900, Sharada Sadan had trained eighty women, who were able to earn their own living through teaching or nursing. Ramabai's greatest legacy was her efforts, the first in India, to

educate widows and the pupils; she left behind to carry on her work. Ramabai was closely associated by Dhandu Keshave Karve, who married a virgin widow himself in 1893 and revived the Widow Remarriage Association in Poona. He began a school for widows in Poona in 1896. The curriculum in Karve's school was designed to make young widows employable and self-sufficient. In experiences led him to build a school for widows in 1896, as he opened a shelter for widows that become a school. Parvatibai, Athavali, Anandibai's widowed sister helped Karve in the growth and expansion of his schools. Later on, Dayanand realized the tragic plight of widow and he started various rescue homes. Slowly, such homes came up in Bombay and other places. However, the proliferation of homes and refugees for fallen women prompted earlier for the 'miserable widows' of Bengal. The solution was borrowed from Britain. Influenced by Mary Carpenter, Sasipade Banerjee and his wife opened a shelter home at Barahanagar near Calcutta in 1887 for Hindu widows called the Hindu Bidhaba Ashram. Bamabodhini Patrika, in August 1892, urged the foundation of shelter homes on the models of a home for poor women and girls, founded in London in 1878. Widow's homes were suitable for women from respectable families, who needed to earn some money, but often these homes were restricted to Brahmin widows. Handicrafts production - particularly sewing and embroidery, enabled only some high caste women to earn a living because they had access to homes, they could live in, and space to work. Widow homes were opened to train them for an independent career and save them from being dependant on their relations. Many middle-class families sent their young widows to various widow's homes for training, mostly industrial.

As Parvati Bai, sister-in-law of D. K. Karve, rejecting all discussion of remarriage, declared her wish to study. After receiving her education in Karve's school she became a teacher. The missionaries, who had arrived in India in the early 19th, began the education of girls. They were followed by a few European laymen, the Government, and the Brahmo Samaj. Later still, the others, Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission and the Theosophical Society also began to help. The need for women's teachers was recognized, among others, by Mary Carpenter, who visited India in 1866.

The first Government teacher's training school was established in Poona in 1870, with 8 pupils, all widows, some of whom did not even know the alphabet. Despite these achievements, there was a difference between the old and the new reformers. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the leaders of reform appealed to the Shastras in support of their views. It was only in the closing years of the nineteenth century that the leaders of reform began appealing to reason instead of Shastras. In the twentieth century, they loved to call themselves a rational reformer unperturbed by the Shastras. From 1900 onwards, in Maharashtra, Malabari and D.K. Karve and in Madras, Annie Besant were the prominent leaders.

Swarnakumari Devi, the mother of Sarala Devi, the president of 'Bidhaba Shilpashram' (The centre for Arts and Crafts for widows) was founded by her daughter Hironmoyee Devi in 1907. During the year 1912, the Hindu Widow's Home Association, had 105 inmates in Poona, of whom 95 were widows, with the annual expenditure about 17,000 Rupees. The whole institute was well managed by the founder D.K. Karve, in 1896. In 1906, a Boarding school for high caste Hindu girls and widows was opened besides the home.

In July, 1912, a group of Hindus organized a Brahmin widow hostel in Madras. Hindu Women's Rescue Home Society was started in memory of Swami Shradhanand, who died in 1927, to provide shelter and render assistance to Hindu women such as deserted wives, betrayed virgins and demised widows. Many conferences emerged and supported for the widow's homes. The National Social Conference, which was held in December, 1910 at Allahabad viewed that the miserable condition of young widow should be improved by starting or further strengthening widow's homes in each province, by giving young widows technical education and permitting such of them, as wish to marry to do so without hindrance. Similarly, the Indian Ladies Conference held at Allahabad in 1910, passed the following resolution that the condition of Hindu widow was pitiable and in order to save them from many troubles, it is necessary to open widow's homes, where they could be educated.

In beginning of the twentieth century, the remarriage of widows gained momentum as women began to organize and speak. Mrinalini Sen married Raja Indra Chandra and was soon widowed. In 1905, she married Nirmal Chandra, second son of Keshab Chandra Sen and went to London with her husband. Sarala

Devi was born in 1872, in a privileged Tagore family of Bengal. In 1905, Sarala Devi as a widow married a widower, Ram Bhuj Choudhari, an Arya Samaji in Punjab. She moved to Lahore and continued her programme. Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya was married in 1911, when she was fourteen, her husband died a year later, Later, she married the poet Harindranath Chattopadhyay, Sarojini Naidu's brother in 1919. She had given society, plenty to gossip about; as a child widow, she not only eschewed the tonsured head, but revealed in wearing brightly colored saris. She remarried, a romantic match, out of caste and community. She went on stage, acting in her husband's play at a time, when the theatre was not considered respectable.

In South India, Durgabai Deshmukh born in 1909 and married at the age of eight into a conservative family became a widow at an early age. She later married C.D. Deshmukh, contested elections and served in the central assembly. These women, took as their point of departure the extraordinary subversive voice of the Hindu widows, bringing alive the feminist consciousness. Widows started to participate in the national movement in the twentieth century. As Nanibala Devi (1888-1967), a child widow, was the leader of the New Jugantar Party in Bengal. Urmila Devi, the widowed sister of the Bengali Congress Leader C.R. Das, urged women to be ready to their homes to serve the country.

Thus the social reformers played an extraordinary role for the upliftment of widows in India.

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