

## Paper-3 Module-34

### Widowhood in India

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#### 1. (B) Description of Module

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### Widowhood in India

#### INTRODUCTION

The present module aims at introducing the phenomenon of widowhood in India to the student. It describes the socio-economic plight of the widows and ritual constrictions placed on them

The student becomes aware of the socio-economic status of widows in India

## ***‘Widow. The word consumes itself’-Sylvia Plath***

Widowhood constitutes one of the multiple facets of Indian womanhood. It’s a culturally unique phenomenon which afflicts millions of women in this country. The position of women in the Indian culture is dubious by virtue of its paradoxical stand on women. On one hand, women are venerated as goddesses and considered as the source of the creative feminine power that holds the authority to construct or destruct the universe. On the other, they are labelled as evil, entrance to hell and a bad influence which should be stayed away from. Widowed women are also subject to the same contradictory attitude towards women in India. They generate mixed emotions of awe, pity and fear. As a nation deeply entrenched in patriarchal ideologies as far as women are concerned, a widowed woman poses a threat to the social organization and is stayed away from at all costs.

### **1. WIDOWS AND WIDOWHOOD**

A widow, in common simplistic understanding is a woman who has lost her husband to death and has not remarried. The lived realities of a widow are seldom as simplistic. Toorn observes that a widow is ‘a formerly married woman who had neither male protection nor means of financial support and who were, thus in need of special legal protection’.<sup>1</sup> Being a widow is a social definition of her identity after the death of her husband. It indicates changes in her life depending on the cultural context and the time period that she inhabits. The state of having lost one's husband to death is termed *widowhood*. The experience of widowhood varies across cultures and time periods. There is no single idea of a widow; being a widow means diverse subjective experiences, varied inter personal and social implications and multiple changes in the life of women across diverse cultural settings.

### **2. INDIAN CONTEXT**

The common term for a widow in India is *vidhavā* which comes from Sanskrit *vidh* which means 'be destitute'. The state of being a widow is termed as widowhood. The predominant image of the widow that inhabits our consciousness is the image of the upper caste, Hindu widow; the lonely ageing figure clad in white, feeble and pale, wrinkling skin, deep sense of loss and suffering,

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<sup>1</sup> Bremmer, Jan N., and Lourens Van Den Bosch. "WIDOWS' WORLDS Representations and Realities." *Between Poverty and the Pyre: Moments in the History of Widowhood*. London: Routledge, 1995. 1. Print.

eyes lacking spark mirroring the pain of abandonment, no dreams for future, head covered by her white garb and prayer on her lips, inhabiting dingy corridors in holy shrines, the inauspicious and the invisible woman. Thousands of widows have been abandoned in holy cities like Vrindavan, Kashi and Mathura where they earn a meagre living by begging, owning petty business or singing. According to the 2001 UN Report titled “Widowhood: Invisible Women, Secluded or Excluded” India ranks first in the number of widows in the world and is home to nearly 33 million widows (6). The 2011 Census in India report states that 8.2% of India’s women population falls under the category of widowed, divorced or separated women. An additional report prepared in 2010 by Loomba Foundation titled "Invisible, Forgotten Sufferers: The Plight of Widows Around the World” states that amongst 245 million widowed women around the world, India alone accounts for 42.4 million widows which constitutes 17.3 percent of world’s widow population. Widowhood can be likened to enforced social disability. Starting from devaluing mourning rituals, restrictions on movement, limitation on meeting people, working, dressing to outright physical, emotional and sexual violence and abuse, widows are subjected to all and constitute a particularly vulnerable category of women. The subdual that widows undergo is suggestive of a systematic curbing of their agency.

### **3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS**

The socio-economic status of widows in India paints a grim picture of the precarious conditions which widows are subject to. Widowhood initiates the woman on a downward spiral of social and economic degradation from which she is seldom able to recover. The identity of women in India is relational in nature and is predominantly defined in terms of her relationship to men in her family. Her identity is dependent on the social and economic position of the male patriarch; father, till she gets married and husband thereafter. Death of a husband symbolizes the loss of male guardianship under whose protection her existence had been in lines with the social expectations of her family and society. From an ideal woman upholding the family values, worthy of emulation she becomes someone who is despised for bringing ill luck to the family. She is held responsible for the death of the husband by failing to fulfill the responsibility of being *pativrata* or the dutiful wife.

### **4. CONSEQUENCES**

Widowhood carries psychological, social and emotional repercussions for the widowed woman. The terms of addressing her change from 'she' to 'it'. Mourning rituals add on to the emotional stress and are a repeated reminder of the death of the husband. She is expected to live a life of severe austerity devoid of 'indulgences' such as colorful clothes, ornaments and make up. Her food pattern changes and she is to ingest simple meals devoid of any spices due to the belief that intake of spices exacerbates sexual desires. In many households widowed women either have their own separate arrangement for cooking food or prepare food for themselves after the food has been prepared for the family. In many parts of the country, shaving the head of the widow is a common practice. All these measure are aimed towards desexualizing the woman so that she becomes unappealing to the many prying eyes of near and far male relatives.

### **5.1 SOCIAL COST**

Socially, husband's death is a matter of social death of the wife. The behavior of the kith and kin changes towards her and she seldom has companions or friends to share her feelings with. She is labelled as inauspicious and is expected to stay away from festivals or functions lest she casts her 'evil eye' and ruins the celebrations for others. She is considered ill-fated and is actively avoided especially during religious rituals. Ironically, she is expected to become more religious and spend more time in service of god since her worldly engagements have supposedly come to an end with the death of the husband. Often, her natal family offers little support as she is not considered a part of the natal family after her marriage. Thus she is left with negligible social backing to cope with the phenomenon.

### **5.2 ECONOMIC COST**

Economically, widowhood almost certainly entails a life of poverty. Since gender roles are more or less rigid in Indian context, death of the breadwinner in the family means a shift in the economic burden on the widow's shoulders. In most of the middle class or lower income households, a widow's labor is exploited as she does domestic chores laboriously day after day. This labor is unpaid for and is extracted from her in return for food, a roof to live under and protection. More importantly, she is devoid of any inheritance rights which could have the potential of providing her financial relief from her burdens. For widows who have children to fend for, the burden doubles since their education and upbringing is to be looked after. Children

of widows are more vulnerable to offences like child sex trafficking and their future remains grim.

## 5. HISTORY OF WIDOWHOOD

Widowhood entails a life of abandonment, loneliness and seclusion. It is a state of economic and social destitution. The origins of the practice of widowhood is unknown though theoretically it can be rooted in brahminical patriarchy which has defined the social order in Indian subcontinent. Manusmriti constitutes the prescriptive text in this regard as it elaborately delineates the prescriptions for a Hindu widow. To quote Chakravarty:

*“She should be long suffering until death, self-restrained, and chaste, striving (to fulfil) the unsurpassed duty of women who have one husband.”*<sup>2</sup>

Manusmriti along with other Dharmashastras can be considered as the source from which prescriptive rules have emanated for widows. It is unclear as to what were the ways in which these were conveyed to the widows and their families and to what extent these prescriptions were followed by them. Moreover one does not have the knowledge if women in ancient period accepted these injunctions which deprecated their position and introduced hardships for them, without showing any resistance. One can only assume that since the Indian society was deeply steeped in Hindu religion, these rules were communicated through god men who were considered as the interpreters of holy texts and that women were coopted into the institution of ascetic widowhood by virtue of it being presented to them as the ideal of chaste femininity and the key for social acceptance after husband’s death.

## 6. LIFE CHOICES

A widowed woman would have three ‘choices’ facing her to define her life trajectory. She could choose to remain an ascetic widow for the rest of her life observing severe austerities and obligatory celibacy. She would have to voluntarily enter the ‘*vanaprastha ashram*’ stage giving up material desires and spending most of her time practicing spirituality. She was to mourn the death of her husband for her remaining life and await being joined with him after death. Additionally, she was to exist under strict restrictions of her conjugal family lest she faltered in

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<sup>2</sup> Chakravarti, Uma, and Preeti Gill. "Prescriptions, Injunctions, Laws." *Shadow Lives: Writings on Widowhood*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001. 37. Print.

her observances and brought disgrace to the family and the deceased husband. Unlike some other parts of the world where mourning would constitute a definite time period, Hindu widows were expected to be in bereavement till their death.

The second 'choice' facing her was to voluntarily opt for the heinous practice of *sati* or self-immolation. It is questionable as to how an enormously painful experience such as burning oneself could constitute a voluntary act. Chen explores the possibility of the supposedly voluntary act being a conditioned response in actuality that some women would consider to undertake to avoid the hardships and humiliation associated with being a widow.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that instances of *sati* were sporadic in ancient India and were restricted to a few groups, it is only later that *sati* becomes a widespread practice in the Indian subcontinent. The woman who 'chose' *sati* was exalted in her status as compared to the widow who chose to remain alive. It was considered an act of extreme courage, love and devotion to her husband. Women who made this choice were venerated and exalted to the status of goddesses with super natural powers and shrines were erected in their memory. In fact, a widely prevalent notion around the practice of *sati* was that the woman on the burning funeral pyre feels no pain. This is in contradiction to observations by some writers who have described measures such as tying the woman to the pyre and crowds preventing the escape of the woman ready to be burned lest she changes her mind. *Sati* was finally abolished in the year 1829 after much deliberation by the British government but the incidences of *sati* continued to take place sporadically. The case of burning of Roop Kanwar in 1987 reopened the debates around *sati*.

The third and somewhat contentious choice for a widow, which was predominantly constituted much later was remarriage. The practice of levirate marriages or widow getting married to the younger brother of the deceased husband was common in some castes though it was strictly forbidden for the Hindu Brahmin widow who was either to choose becoming a *sati* or remain a recluse for the rest of her life. Marriage of Hindu widows became legal in the year 1856 with the efforts of social reformers like Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar. However a clause was included in the judgment which required the widow to relinquish her right to her dead husband's property. This was a regressive clause which left widows in a state of poverty. Chen points out that the key

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<sup>3</sup> Chen, Martha Alter. "The Sati." *Perpetual Mourning: Widowhood in Rural India*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2000. 54. Print.

factors which influenced remarriage were widow's age, caste, number of children and possession of private property.<sup>4</sup>

## **7. PUBLIC PERCEPTION**

During the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the widow figure occurred with increased frequency in writings of many Hindi and vernacular writers. Writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Munshi Premchand and Mahadevi Verma and Mahasweta Devi have woven sensitive and heart wrenching tales of widow characters. Chandra points out that though abolition of sati had taken place and Widow Remarriage was made legal and an open option for many widows the mental attitudes towards widows remained somewhat inconsistent. The dubious mindsets were reflected in the way many of the writers dealt with the widow figures in their writings. Many novels displayed latent condemnation of widows by portraying them as young seductresses yearning for emotional closeness who would attempt to seduce youthful married men and destroy their conjugal life. The subsequent events of the story would so unfold as to make the widow realize her mistake and a disillusionment with the material world. Even in literary context she would either become a cynic or face death.<sup>5</sup>

## **8. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

On a spectrum of feminine identities, widows fall in a similar category as that of virgins or single women. What makes a widow a greater deviant is her sexual experience. A virgin is a sexually inexperienced woman but a widow has experienced desire and sexual union. In absence of the 'legitimate' sexual partner she is assumed as having a voracious sexual appetite which makes her treacherously aberrant. Her supposed unbridled sexuality becomes a symbol of disorder and she is assumed to have great destructive potential. It is this anxiety that mirrors in the fiction around widowhood in earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The attitudes that widowhood invokes in the society can be understood in terms of the framework as suggested by Buitelaar who borrows from Douglas to explain the coping

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<sup>4</sup> Chen, Martha Alter. "The Remarried Widow." *Perpetual Mourning: Widowhood in Rural India*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2000. 82-85. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Chandra Sudhir. "Conflicted Beliefs and Men's Consciousness about Women Widow Marriage in Later Nineteenth Century Indian Literature," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31 October 1987.

mechanisms in four ways.<sup>6</sup> Firstly, the society tries to reinterpret her anomalous position through mechanisms like remarriage. The Hindu Remarriage Act can be categorized under this step. Also, younger widows, by virtue of their nascent sexual desires, are encouraged to remarry whereas older widows who are able to avert remarriage and retain their 'chastity' gain respect. The desexualization of the widow's body by tonsuring of heads, removal of ornaments etc. can be considered another tool of reinterpretation.

The second mechanism is that of avoidance. Ritual imposition of taboos can be considered as a tool in this regard. For e.g.: There is a waiting period of three menstrual cycle in Islam called *Idda* or *Iddat* where the Muslim widow is home bound, is not allowed to step out of the premises of the home and is not to meet her male relatives. This is to determine whether she is pregnant or not to establish lineage.

The third mechanism is physical control. The practice of sati ensured the total annihilation of widowed body so as to avoid its contamination by sexual union with males other than the husband.

The last but not the least mechanism is attributing danger to the widowed woman. She is rendered as a body with insatiable sexual appetite intending to seduce innocent men and devour them sexually. They are attributed supernatural powers and are associated with witchcraft and death.

Buitelaar further states that the sexuality of the widow is not the only factor that makes her a deviant. The very fact that the widow has outlived her husband is a cause of anxiety in many cultures. Outliving the husband translates into outliving his authority and control over her life. The Punjabi abuse 'khasma nu khani' literally translates into the one who has devoured her husband thus widow becomes the cause of the death of the husband.

## **9. MULTIPLE WIDOWHOODS**

Widowhood experiences are diverse in India though it is the upper caste Brahmin widow who finds wide reference in literature and films. Dalit widowhood, for instance, stands at an oppositional juncture to brahminical widowhood. A Brahmin widow is expected to follow

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<sup>6</sup> Bremmer, Jan N., and Lourens Van Den Bosch. "WIDOWS'WORLDS Representations and Realities." *Between Poverty and the Pyre Moments in the History of Widowhood*. London: Routledge, 2002. 12. Print.



*enforced celibacy* whereas a dalit widow is expected to uphold *enforced cohabitation*.<sup>7</sup> Practice of secondary unions and levirate marriages ensure that a low caste woman's productive and reproductive labor is fully exploited. Many scholars consider dalit widows to be facing triple oppression; that of being a dalit, a woman and a widow.

Certain Muslim communities such as the *Bohra* Muslims observe *Iddat* on the death of a husband. *Iddat* constitutes a waiting period of a determinate number of months during which the widow is barred from exiting her house. She is required to follow religious prescriptions that prohibit her from wearing collyrium in her eyes, combing her hair, applying henna, or using ornaments. Islamic scholars consider this directive to be a "balance" between mourning of husband's death and protecting the widow from criticism that she might be subjected to from re-marrying too quickly after her husband's death. This is also to ascertain whether a woman is pregnant or not. There is little documentation on the effect of this quarantining of woman after the death of her husband but the practice itself is indicative of the psychosocial and emotional isolation that the practice bestows upon her and the patriarchal need to regulate her sexuality.

The state tends to become particularly paternalistic when the reason behind the husband's death is failure of the state machinery. Thus partition widows, kargil widows and widows of missing persons in Kashmir become special categories where the state has tried to step in and act like the fatherly patriarch. Thus such widowhood has amounted to compensation packages and job opportunities by the state which have not been able to address the issue of marginalization and exploitation faced by the widows. There have been numerous reported cases of harassment of widow by the husbands family to part with the compensation money, pressure to get married to the dead husbands brother, and sign away the job opportunity offered to them by the state.

## **10. WIDOWHOOD IN MEDIA**

The meaning of widowhood is changing in India. The changing meanings can be evidenced through analyzing media representations of widowhood. Two mainstream Hindi films which have centered around widows, are "Water" by Deepa Mehta (2005) and "Dor" by Nagesh Kuknoor (2006). Kalyani (Lisa Ray) plays the role of a young widow who is forced into prostitution by an elder widow to fend for the ashram where they live their lives of penance and

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<sup>7</sup> Chakravarti, Uma, and Preeti Gill. Introduction. *Shadow Lives: Writings on Widowhood*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001. 7. Print.

sacrifice. The fact that Kalyani brings money to the ashram gives her some agency and freedom to live on her own terms. But when Narayan (John Abraham), a Gandhian and a nationalism enthusiast comes along and the two fall in love with each other, Kalyani is in a fix. She wishes to marry him but the ashram holds her back in the name of Dharma. Though Kalyani does manage to release herself from these bounds with the help of Shakuntala (Seema Biswas), another orthodox but sensible widow, she realizes she cannot marry Narayan because his father has been one of her patrons. When she returns to the ashram after turning down the marriage, she sees that she has no way other than going back to prostitution if she wishes to live there. So she finally commits suicide. Meera (Ayesha Takia), a young widow and Zeenat (Gul Panag) happen to become friends by the chance of fate. Dor's reflection of a widow is a with her widowhood in her own ways. Meera, who is robbed of marital pleasures at a young age, is filled with indignation towards her in-laws as they chose to send their son to a foreign country to earn. Meera is vocal about her discontent and is also able to confront her father-in-law about his attempt to sell her off to the rich, lecherous contractor.

## **11. CONCLUSION**

The widow figure was profusely used during the independence era as the ideal of Indian femininity which was to be emulated by women of those times. Post-independence the precarious state of the widows was briefly discussed in the '*Towards Equality*' report in the year 1974 which is considered as a founding text for initiating and intensifying debates around women's issues in India. Peculiarly, there was no systematic public debate undertaken on the issue of widowhood. A landmark conference on widows in India was held in March 1994 at IIM Bangalore where widows from different parts of the country were invited to bring their plight into public discussion. The plight of the widows continues to be perilous in India due to lack of organized public action.

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