

Social Status of Hindu Widows in Norther India during Mediaeval Period

Abstract

Social status of Hindu widows in Northern India during mediaeval period was very pitiable. It was gradual deterioration and their freedom was to large extent curtailed, although it was quite substantial as yet. During the Vedic age and later Vedic age their status was far better than that of the mediaeval period. As the Hindu women had a far different fate from that of their husbands for they cannot remarry after their husband death. But a man was permitted to have more than one wife. In this context a question has come to our mind that what was the social status of women in general and status of Hindu widows in particular in Northern India? So this paper is an attempt to study the social status of Hindu widows in Northern India during mediaeval period.

Keywords: Social, Status, Widow.

Introduction

The call for realizing and defining women's role in the development of society was never as acute as it is today. It is natural that good deals of studies have been made to achieve the goal. But it can be said without much objections that the status of women in general and status of Hindu widows in particular have been secondary barring with a few exception. So, it is need of hour to study the social status of widows in Hindu society.

Statement of the problem

The status of women in a society is the reflection as society itself. So, more advance a society is, more emancipated its women will be. Hence, one cannot expect advanced women in degraded society or vice-versa. The question of women status in different aspects getting priority. Throughout the world, there is a growing awareness among the women themselves. In India also various women organizations have been set up demanding equal right and position for women. Even attempt is made at official level to ensure the social status of women. But what is the social status of women in general and status of Hindu widows in particular in Northern India? This question has involved the attention of social workers, researchers, planning groups, governments, grass root workers and social reformers as the multiple and complex problem pertaining to women. As they have been a second rate citizen through the ages. Of course, as consolations there have been bright phases but very brief and temporary. Why so? To answer this we will have to study the social status of Hindu widows in Northern India during mediaeval period.

Objectives

This paper is an attempt to assess the social position of Hindu widows in Northern India. The objective of the paper is to bring into focus, the relevant rays radiating from the available sources in such a way as to paint picture of the social status Hindu widows in Northern India during mediaeval period.

Methodology

Historical research methodology is adopted in this paper.

Discussion/Undertaking the study

'The term 'Social Status' comprises here the position, power and abilities of widows as well as privileges enjoyed by them in their society on the basis of certain universal social features.'(Gupta, K: 1987)

'A status is a position in a social group or grouping in relation to other positions held by individuals in the same group or grouping. A given position determines the amount of authority wielded or the degree of submission required. Thus the status is a position which is either ascribed or achieved' (Baruah S.L.(ed):1992) 'The social definition of widow is a state of deprivation and stigmatized life-long condition which gets ritual and religious representations and symbolism of negation and negotiations.'



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(Ahuja, M: 1996) A widow is a woman whose spouse has died, while a widower is a man whose spouse has died. The state of having lost one's spouse to death is termed *widowhood*.

(Merriam-Webster: Retrieved 2016-03-18.)

Widow's position in early India was not as miserable as it became later on. Altekhar (Altekhar, A.S: 1987) had said that the position of a widow as a whole was fairly satisfactory down to 300 B.C. She was not required to immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. The customs of tonsure (shaving of head) was absolutely unknown. Her only disability was that she was not regarded as an heir to her husband's property. However, this was more or less a theoretical disability. Remarriage and Niyoga became common. She was not looked down upon as inauspicious and therefore, not debarred from taking part in religious rituals, social ceremonies and ceremonial festivals. She was allowed to live a normal life like any other woman in the family. No social stigma was attached to her. (Pande, R. B: 1987) Indian women in the Ancient times had the right to remarry after the death of their husband. We find sufficient evidences, regarding the prevalence of widow remarriage in the Rig Vedic period.

The position of widow's began to deteriorate when sati custom began to come into vogue gradually in *Khatriya* circles, though some thinkers were able to check its spread. The customs of remarriage and *Niyoga* began to become unpopular at about the beginning of the Christian era. After that the status of women in general and status of Widows in particular in northern India became degraded. They had to spend their life with a full of misery. Many widows waded through their unwanted life supported by such solace as religion could afford them. A few lapsed in to a life of socially defined ignominy and immorality due to personal-contextual oppressive circumstances. From 1000 A.D the condition of widow further deteriorated. The prohibition of remarriage began to be extended even to the cases of child widows. (Altekhar, A.S.: reprint.1987). The practice of tonsure came into vogue. The custom of sati began to appeal more and more to all classes of society. A widow did not receive much sympathy from society.

During the time of the Manu Samhita, widow remarriage was considered as a disresponsible practice. In the texts of Manu Samhita which refer to remarriage "There is no provision regarding the remarriage of the widows." He prescribed the duties of widows as "At her pleasure let her emaciate her body by living on pure flowers, roots and fruits; let her not even pronounce the name of another man after her lord had deceased, let her continue, till death, forgiving injuries, performing harsh duties, avoiding sexual pleasures and practicing virtue. All this is actually done or attempted to be done with the greatest self-denial." (Muller, F. Max(ed):1879) Manu put some restrictions on widows in form of certain duties. Some of these were-

1. A widow should never remarry.
2. Even after the death of her husband, she should not think of other man.

3. After the death of her husband, she should remain chaste and be patient with hardships.
4. If her husband left no son or daughter, she should not go to another man have an offspring.

According to Pietro Della Valle, we find that widow remarriage was considered a matter of great dishonor and infidelity in Hindu society during mediaeval period. If a woman, after the death of her husband, showed her willing to remarry instead of leading the life of a widow, no man of her own caste ever agreed to accept her hand; and she was regarded as an unchaste woman in the society. (Edward G, 2016)

The pitiable lot of the Hindu widows and the practice of *Sati*, Alberuni said that, "If a wife loses her husband by death, she cannot marry another man. She has only to choose between two things-either to remain a widow as long as she lives or to burn herself: and the latter eventuality is considered the preferable, because as a widow she is ill treated as long as she lives." (Sanchu, Edward, C.:2002).

The status of Hindu widows during the mediaeval period was very pitiable. The Hindu women had a far different fate from that of their husband for they could not remarry after their husband death. This practice was followed very strictly in the upper classes (Gupta.K:1986)

But a man was permitted to have more than one wife. It is a common saying all over India that neglected property needs "a widow's nursing".

Widows are considered inauspicious on many occasions. To see a widow in the morning or to face her while going on a journey or some mission is regarded a bad omen. Her presence on any auspicious occasion is considered to bring calamity, misfortune and frustration. Consequently, she has to keep herself away or at a distance. Society also makes institutionalized demands on her. Some of the normative restrictions imposed by the society on widows are (Ahuja, M: 1996)

1. Renounce all worldly things, do not engage in social affairs and lead an ascetic life.
2. Discard bangles and gold ornaments and colourful clothes.
3. Eat simple food and sleep on the floor on mattress.
4. Do not use shoes but walk bare-footed.
5. Devote free time to *Nama- Prasanga*, visiting temples and places of pilgrimage.
6. Avoid evening meal or at most visit to temple in the evening and eat the *Prasad* of parched *rice* and *dal*.
7. Do not laugh or even talk loudly, and do not speak with outsiders.
8. If possible, join some religious order and bring about the spiritual welfare.
9. Do not attend marriages and other social ceremonies in the family; do not participate in rejoicing but remain aloof from other

However, some rights were legally codified and some legislative measures were taken in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, specially after independence, which improved their lot. This custom, called *sati*, was outlawed in 1829 in British India and

again in 1987 in independent India by the *Sati Prevention Act*, which made it illegal to support, glorify or attempt to commit sati. Support of sati, including coercing or forcing someone to commit sati, can be punished by death sentence or life imprisonment, while glorifying sati is punishable with one to seven years in prison. The Hindu Remarriage Act, 1856 permitted widows to remarry. The Hindu succession Act, 1956 gives to a widow a share in husband property equal to the children's share and the right to hold and dispose of property inherited. The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956 entitles widows to adopt a child. The Hindu Minority and the Guardianship Act, 1956 accepts them as the natural guardian of their children after the father's death.

Conclusion

The status of widow, during the period under study was deplorable. Women enjoyed an honoured position in the Vedic age and participated in various social, intellectual and spiritual activities on equal terms with men. In the post Vedic period there was a gradual deterioration of their position and their freedom was to large extent curtailed, although it was quite substantial as yet. With the coming of Muslims the position of the Indian women as well as the women of Northern India greatly deteriorated, although it was retrieved to some extent during subsequent centuries. Widows remained subject to the bitterest taunts and insults. She was the unpaid maid of all work of the family. She was considered unclean, a thing of ill women. So, unlucky that if a man was starting on some business ventures and on leaving his door-way should by chance meet a widow, he would return to his house and say few prayers to counteract his bad luck. It was commonly believed that a virtuous woman, who after the death of her

husband constantly remained chaste, reached heaven, through she might have no son. Women, who from a desire to have offspring violated her duty towards her deceased husband, brought on herself disgrace in this world and lost her place with her husband in the heaven. Practice of Sati and Jauhar were also prevalent among the higher sections of Hindu society and the Rajputs. Thus the social status of Hindu widows during the period under study was one of far greater misery than we can depict.

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