

# The Living Sati: A View From Literature

Dr. Karabi Mitra\*

## Abstract

*The paper aims to focus on the changing life style of the high –caste widows in Bengal in the light of literature. It is well-known that, the widow –remarriage movement was initiated in Bengal by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. However due to various reasons the movement was not carried on by his successors in the realm of social reform movement. On the contrary the widows' question assumed a Hindu nationalist tinge and they were projected as upholders of Santana tradition. A genre of literary writings highlighting the austere life style of widowed ladies from other parts of India were published in order to implant a strong conservative tradition of Hindu widowhood among the suffering milieu. In the present study how the literary writings of the twentieth century projected the pangs and challenges faced by the widowed ladies mostly being in their early youth will be highlighted. Despite their moral support to them the writers sincerely sketched the dilemmas experienced by the ladies. The personal sufferings and the social hurdles experienced by the widowed ladies of the 'modern days; poses a challenge to the 'globalized 'modern social view –point which relishes at the projection of white-clad young widow even on the screen of popular television serials. The plight, the sufferings, the deprivations and the mental block imposed by the society on one segment of our generation poses us a vital question 'whether we are capable enough to wipe off their tears and place them on a truly place of social honor?'*

## Introduction

The paper aims to focus on the changing life style of the high caste Hindu widows in Bengal in the light of literature. It is well known that, the widow –remarriage movement was initiated in Bengal by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar . However due to various reasons the movement was not carried on by his successors in the realm of social reform movement. On the contrary the widows' question assumed a Hindu nationalist tinge and they were projected as upholders of sanatana tradition . A genre of literary writings highlighting the austere life style of widowed ladies from other parts of India were published in order to implant a strong conservative tradition of Hindu widowhood among the readers.

## Objectives

In the present study how the literary writings of the late nineteenth to twentieth century projected the pangs and challenges faced by the widowed ladies mostly being in their early youth will be highlighted. Despite their moral support to them the writers sincerely sketched the dilemmas experienced by the ladies.

The personal sufferings and the social hurdles experienced by the widowed ladies of the 'modern days, throw a challenge to the 'globalized' modern viewpoint which relishes at the projection of white-clad young widow or observance of austere widowhood even on the screen of popular television serials.

## Methodology

Bengali literature dating from mid-nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century is the core material. Besides supportive documents for historical analysis, data collected from various

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\*Associate Professor, Dept. of History, B.K. Girls' College, Howrah, West Bengal, India.

sites and personal interview are other source of information.

### The Text

During the colonial period the Hindu women's body was 'the ultimate site of virtue, of stability, the last refuge of freedom (Sarkar, 2001, p. 265) and considered as free from the polluting touch of the colonial government since they inhabited in the inner domain and no direct contact with the outside world was made. She was the upholder of the tradition. Paradoxically the widow seems to be de-gendered and her body was subjected to the colonial control as a result of the legal interventions in matters of Sati, remarriage of the widows etc.

With the passage of the Widow remarriage Act (1829) the social control over her body and behavior was tightened probably with a scheme to not to allow her to alienate family property or *streedhan* i.e. the property she inherited from her parents. In order to challenge the colonial interventions she was supposed to act with complete submission to the conservative tradition. Since during the time under discussion conservatism and nationalism became synonymous for some time therefore, her body became a storehouse of conservatism as well as nationalism. In fact she was exposed to three sorts of stress:- her personal loss, life of deprivation and playing the role of national symbol as ideal widow.

As a result the lifestyle stored for the Hindu widow was that of severe austerity. Despite their privilege to live life they were deprived of nutritious food, proper dress and their personal life became a matter of public intervention. Despite the enactment of 1856 ensuring remarriage of the widows and glorification of the Hindu widowhood on the part of social thinkers they became a neglected community in the Hindu family. A number of tracts questioned the efforts of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar in obnoxious language (Chakraborti, 1998, p. 13). The enactment of 1856 set a virtual taboo on her remarriage since she was supposed to be deprived of rights in the property of her deceased husband and if she is a minor the remarriage will have to be permitted by her guardians (Chakravarti & Gill, 2001, pp. 60-2). No space for her own decision was left.

In Bengal widowhood opened a significant area of nationalist discussion. Bhudev Mukhopadhyay prescribed ideal lifestyle for the widow in his *Baidhavya Brata* (1356 B.S.). He stressed on the social respect for the lady and observed that caring attitude from the family members may relieve her deep rooted sorrow and she may devote herself in daily activities. It is clear that, prevailing practice of mal-treatment of the widows led him to write the treatise.

Contemporary literature glorified historical widowed women namely Ahalyabai, Jijabai, Tarabai and others. Ahalyabai, the queen of Indore remained the best model of Hindu widowhood especially in a period when the maintenance of the chastity of the widows [especially the younger generation] presented a social challenge. Despite her role as the head of a disturbed region and continuous engagement in public welfare all of the biographers highlighted her virtuous life and identity as a widowed lady (Basu, 1900). The anxiety to control the sexuality of the widow found expression in reinstating the principle of *pativrata* or 'wifely devotion'. In this context publication of prescriptive texts on widowhood by Bhudev and the legend of Savitri by Chandranath Basu entitled *Savitritatwa* {1900} may be referred to.

Veneration for the sati, worship in various forms, identification of the custom with 'national tradition' created a permanent place for the widow in the Hindu mind-set. Vrindaban and Benaras still remain the abode of the widows where they are exposed to severe exploitations.

While the aged are forced to live in a near-begging condition the younger one are exposed to the sex hungry people. Meera Khanna, one of the convenors of the world's first International Conference on Widows in South Asia [February,2002}made a detailed study on their condition and commented 'we treat widowhood not as a natural stage in the life cycle of an woman we treat it as some kind of an aberration.We accept death but we don't accept widowhood....because somewhere in the Indian psyche, the woman's identity is with the man and the minute he is not there it is something that cannot be accepted.'

*Stridharmapaddhati* by Tryambakayajvan, an eighteenth century Sanskrit text (Leslie, 1989, pp.299-304) underlined the do's and don'ts of the widows. According to him 'she should live the subdued and restricted life of the celibate student'. The 'restriction's included eating only once a day, severe fasting, wearing of colorless saree,no use of luxurious articles and ornaments, sleeping on the ground etc .Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, a social worker from Maharashtra observed that the social torture fell much upon the childless widow being 'the greatest criminal upon whom Heaven's judgment has been pronounced (Saraswati,1888). Tarabai Shinde another exponent of the widow's rights made a caustic criticism of the social taboos imposed on the widow (O'Hanlon, 1994).

Undoubtedly the widowed milieu inhabited in the *antahpur* and suffered social dishonor in numerous ways. Tonsuring, austere life-style, observance of *ekadasi* and other rituals without a drop of water became their daily practice. They practiced the rituals in order to wipe away own sins and to gain'heaven for her and her husband'. Nobody questioned on the negation of human-rights towards this large section of women.Probably their non-productivity was the chief source of the social ostracization. The scenario changed to some extent in the urban sector however, the high caste widows'sufferings remain unaltered in the semi-urban and rural areas.

Coming back to the Vrindaban context *The Telegraph* [December,20,2007] reported that among 10000 widows present there during the conference officially more than 6000 were from West Bengal. However NGOs estimated the number around 20000 from Bengal and the number of assembled widows around 35000. They were aged between 45-82 and lived in temples. Surprisingly the representatives of the West Bengal government failed to turn up at most of the Joint co-ordination meetings held between the U.P.government and that of West Bengal. The Government set up Welfare and Rehabilitation Board {WARB} to look after the widows and dependents of those who died in harness, family pension schemes are aimed to take care of their financial status. However, it was observed that,in most of the cases the family members get rid of their helplessness. Either they force her to marry someone of them and then abandon her or snatch away her pension. They cannot be considered as a monolithic group rather like other social groups they are a multi-layered people with varied dimension of problems.

While condition of the average widows especially living in rural and semi-urban sector remains a matter of grave concern and nowadays NGOs are working for them, some of them are equipped with vocational training yet social outlook towards them has not altered a lot .Lack of education is the greatest obstacle in some sector while in an era of nuclear family system the elderly widows face utter neglect and disrespect. Therefore the nature of the problems must be decided upon at first next the means of solution may be chalked out. Mere raising of the complaint of the violation of human rights may not be a solution but empowerment of women by a combination of private and public effort and framing of the pattern of education with the objective of the creation of self-esteem,confidence among

the girl children may be of some use for the average women .

It is well-known that, literature sincerely projects the society and delivers the message to the average people in a successful manner. In the present paper the reflection of widowhood of the high caste Hindu women in vernacular literature will be highlighted. Several popular novels dating from late nineteenth to mid twentieth centuries are selected for discussion since this span of time witnessed radical changes in the life of the women. Apart from education they actively participated in the political life of the nation which definitely altered their mind set and vision of the inner and outer space of the household. Numerous lady authors articulated their thoughts and it is noted that, projection of the widows represented a dilemma in the literature. While Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore, the stalwarts of modernity stressed on the critical mentality of Rohini and Binodini, their heroines most of the time who felt jealous of the child wives of Govindalal and Mahendra in *Krishnakanter Will* (Bankimchandra Chatterjee, 1875) and *Chokher Bali* (Rabindranath Tagore, 1902) respectively and in course of events finally won over their hearts and involved in extra-marital relationships Mokshada of *Pratham Pratisruti* (Ashapura Devi, 1966), Bandana of *Swet Patharer Thala* (Bani Basu, 1990) were more concerned for their family life and social responsibilities. They definitely had a craving for their husbands whom they lost at an early age however, sexuality is not covering their personalities. It seems that, they are more down-to-earth by nature. Ashapura reminds the reader how the widowed ladies upheld the tradition of preparing seasonal delicacies and devoted their life for the well being of the family especially in a joint family system. Krishna Kripalani, the translator of *Chokher Bali* described Binodini as 'the most real, convincing and full-blooded'. In her frustrations and suffering is summed up the author's ironic acceptance of the orthodox Hindu society of the day... Conscious of beauty and wit she rebels against the unjust privations of a bleak and humiliated existence to which as a widow she is condemned for life and asserts her right to love and happiness.'... "In no other novel has he accepted the kinship between love and sex with such frank sympathy--- the white lotus of love in the slime of desire.' (Kripalani, 2007, pp. vi-vii). Rohini and Binodini are two rebel characters who refused to live as 'living Sati' however in the end one was murdered and the other reformed herself and agreed to dedicate herself to social work. Their determination to live life in their own terms died out.

Bhudev's mythical seat of extra-terrestrial reverence to the widows in the Hindu family was deconstructed by both of the male novelists under discussion. The beautiful young widow's unlimited capability of doing and undoing settled facts like married life has been established by them. Evidently Bankim was in support of the regimented life of the widow and in the novel he referred to how widow-remarriage had become a fashionable affair with the neo-youth of Bengal. Thereform of widow remarriage had a repercussion on the family life of Bengal. However Bankim was not optimistic about the future of the widows like Rohini therefore she suffered death-penalty and her partner sought for a new divine life. Binodini's role as a superiority in love and sacrifice has dwarfed the middle class married male. When she decided to relieve the man she left her. In a way these novels are feminist by nature because the story evolved around the emotion of the female and they remained the ultimate decision-maker in their life.

Traditionally in Bengal the widows were sent to Benaras to live a miserable life because 'deploring them to a distant land was a convenient strategy to get rid of them and a pilgrimage place served as the right choice, ensuring the religious commitment of the Bengali male populace' (EPW, 2000, p. 1151). Whenever their relatives remembered them they sent a

meagre amount of money for their subsistence. However most of them were forced to beg and the younger section opted for sex work. Jyotirmayee Devi pictured the extremities of their life at Kasi in her story *Pinjrapol* (1987). Her clear view discovered the paradox within their meagre lifestyle. Haimo, the liberated daughter of Sarada realized the ultimate truth of physical necessity in the life of man. She realized that, modernity failed to alter their austerities...the widows irrespective of their social status are the worst sufferers of traditionalism. She exclaimed that, like the use of conch bangle and vermilion as a symbol of chastity, the white attire of the widow symbolizes sacrifice.

Towards the end of the century the social status of the widows changed in favor of their greater acceptance in the social life. Probably the male authors of the early twentieth century could not imagine for any alternative life style which was not the case for Bani Basu, an author of the late twentieth century. Her Bandana started to live an austere widowhood. With the intervention of her uncle she was 'rescued' and began to live the normal life with occasional interventions of conservatism. Unlike her counterparts Bandana, the central character of *Swet Patharer Thala* realized that, observance of some customs merely lead to cover the unalterable truth of widowhood. Finally her decision to get married was not supported by her University –educated son who however, later on bargained with her regarding her remarriage in exchange of his marriage with an upstart girl. In the climax the educated, liberated young daughter-in-law humiliated Bandana by questioning her liberal attitude towards food and dress code. Basu showed that, superstitions regarding widows are certainly not limited within the so-called backward conservative section but on the contrary contaminate the 'modern' mind too. The co-teachers and office colleagues of Bandana equally taunted her. Therefore it seems that social humiliation of the widows is a permanent feature of contemporary Hindu society and it is closely related to the mindset of the better positioned, powerful milieu irrespective of gender, class and cultural background.

A diametrically opposite representation of a widowed lady was made by Binata Roy Choudhury in her *Anyo Ami* (2009). Tamasa, the heroine of the novel was a young widow who led life in her own terms. She used her social affluence to get Jhalak, a gigolo as her bed-partner. The age-old tradition of humiliation of the widows as soft target gives way to a reverse process. In the end of the story Roy Choudhury explained inter-gender relationship on the basis of power-relationship fed by cash-nexus.

In our very small discussion a fraction of the life of the Hindu widows have been highlighted with the help of literary representations. Both the rural and urban milieu are selected for discussion. Truly the urban-centric reforms did not have much effect on the rural women during the early part of our study however the present picture is changing. It seems that, at least theoretically after much struggle during the end of the century traditional rigidity in the life style of the Hindu widows has left the ground in favor of their living in their own terms. The figure of 'widow as a modern, liberal, rights-bearing subject' (Majumdar, *EPW*, 2002 p.5015) is emerging out of the darkness of blind conventions. May not all of them seek sexual liberty in the fashion of Tamasa however most of them decide their own food and dress and lifestyle. Especially in urban scenario rigidity is no longer followed as a mark of reverence towards the conjugal relationship. Their increasing rate of higher education, participation in social reforms as well as NGOs, 'writing and petitioning for better health and child care facilities ...material benefits, improved marriage and inheritance laws, suffrage' (Sarkar&Sarkar, 2007, p.7) are agents of change in the status of women and logically the widows are beneficiaries of the improvements. The mind-set of the Hindu widows is probably changing towards a rational end. In the nuclear families they are taking own

decisions regarding their lifestyle and here lies the possible silver lines in the life of high caste Hindu widows.

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