PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF WIDOWHOOD: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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The child. She was arrested and sent to court.1 It was not a normal occurrence. A widow giving birth to a child was considered a social sin and no wonder she travelled all the way to Madras secretly to escape from the criticism of the society. The Kumaran revealed the fact that 92% of widows, who gave birth to a child, committed suicide.2 Apart from caste difference, the sufferings of widows varied due to the age factor. An old widow was much better off than a child widow or a childless widow.3 Although widow re-marriage had been legalized since 1856, it remained an uncommon practice in Tamil Nadu even by 1929.4

The Kudi Arasu revealed a shocking report that according to the Census of 1921, there were 11,892 child widows in Tamil Nadu, who were under the age of five years and among them, 597 were under the age of one. The journal wondered what was the crime the children had done and for what crime they were suffering with this social chastisement. The questions raised by the journal, changed the views of the public towards the problem of widows.5 The orthodox people criticized such journals as anti-public. The Kumaran bravely wrote that they were ready to carry the title given by the orthodox people, if the widows could see dawn in their life.6 Compared with the widows of other religions, Hindu widows underwent many hardships due to the religious rules and customs. Neelavathi, the Self-Respect cadre, wrote in an article in Kudi Arasu, that the tears and sufferings of the widows would be the major cause for the downfall of Hinduism in this land. She supplemented that the sufferings of widows were more severe than untouchability.7

Letters to Kokilambal

The journals mobilised the public in favour of widow marriage through their own techniques. Gnanasakaram followed a technique of a long story in the form of letters written by a widow named Kokilambal, under the title of ‘Kokilambal Kadithangal’ (Letters from Kokilambal) in the year 1911.8 The tale dealt with many social evils like problems of widowhood, child marriage and advocated widow remarriage as the solution. In this story, Kokilambal, a small girl got married to an elderly man. When she attained puberty, she became a widow. The family members of the husband censured her as ill-fated for the
demise of her husband. The story ended when the girl fell in love with a young man and got married to him.

The journal was bold enough to make public such revolutionary climax in those days. The story exposed evidently the agonies of widows. The sentences uttered by the female lead, “It’s your stupidity to organize marriage for me with a man of forty five, when I was seven”9 and “The man was similar to my father. Is he an apt pair for me?”10 The evil of child marriage was strongly condemned by journals. The story exposed the sufferings like forcible tonsure and murky room isolation. The story witnessed that the widow herself turned towards the re-marriage. The story turned the minds of the readers towards the cause of widow marriage. This ground-breaking endeavour, done by the journal, created a stir among the orthodox people whereas it was received by the broad-minded people.

**Widowhood Worse than Sati**

Before 1829, sati was followed in major parts of India. The Colonial Government enacted an Act to terminate the evil practice. But there was no way to send the sufferings of the living widows. There were difference of opinion between orthodox and liberal press on the issue of sati and widowhood. The orthodox journals welcomed the continuation of widowhood and always praised the system of sati. The *Arya Dharmam*, a conservative journal, observed that the strong-minded women certainly would go for sati and only the less determined women would opt for widowhood.11 The *Viveka Bodhini* observed that the *uthamapathinis*12 would be dying immediately after the death of their husbands, those who could not die immediately would go for sati and those who could not opt for both, would go for widowhood.13 It indirectly suggested that death was the only way to flee from the painful widowhood. The journal *Ananda Bodhini* frankly wrote against widow re-marriage in 1918.14 But in course of time, it changed its view on widow re-marriage. It pointed out that in olden days, women were given freedom to opt for sati or widowhood and in the same way, they would be given the freedom to go for re-marriage.15 *Nattukkottai Vaisyan* condemned the system of forced widowhood as inhuman and it was worse than the cruel practice of Sati.16 The *Kudi Arasu* expressed its view that sati was painful for one day whereas widowhood was most painful for the whole lifetime.17 Periyar E.V.R. wrote in the *Kudi Arasu* that Rajaram Mohan Roy should be blamed for the tears of widows. Unless he worked hard for the abolition of Sati Act, widows could be immolated with the dead bodies of their husbands. As a consequence of the Act, they had to live with everlasting sufferings. Instead of dying with only one death, they were forced by the Act to live with a sequence of deaths frequently.18 Thus,
the journal indirectly asked the Government and the public to take some efforts to bring an end to the tears of widows.

**Obstacles for Widow Re-marriage**

To educate the public on widow re-marriage, the journals explained the impediments before the reform. The major obstacle was the mind-set of the orthodox people. They were not prepared for the change and they did not allow others for the same either. Even though there was a law favouring remarriage was enacted in 1856, the orthodox people were conveniently blissful of the law. The Government was not paying attention to enforcing the law effectively. The mass illiteracy among the Indian women was another obstacle. Although men of foresight came forward to marry the widows, majority of widows, due to their illiteracy and fear about social stigma, were not ready to re-marry. The orthodox people spiritualized the entire marriage system. The people could not come out from the clutches of religion on marriage matters. The deep-rooted caste system was a further barrier in the track of positive social change.

**Widow Re-marriage and Sastras**

While dealing with the problem of widow re-marriage, the liberal journals openly criticized the age old sastras while the conservative journals, though they were willing to support the widow re-marriage, wrote against it due to the influence of sastras. Some conservative journals registered their support to re-marriage most moderately in the initial times. Anandha Bodhini wrote against widow re-marriage on the grounds that the wife should treat her husband as god during his life and even after his death, she should give the same treatment to him. Hence widow re-marriage was against the 'pathiviradha dharma'. Later it altered its view and it observed in an article that the re-marriage of a child widow would not affect her chastity. In the same article, it recommended that the system of child marriage should be eliminated and if not, atleast the society should recognize the re-marriage of child widows. The editor of the journal also endorsed this view. But Nattukkottai Vaisyan, a liberal journal, observed that the widow re-marriage was not against the sastras. It raised the question whether the widow re-marriage was against sastras. The journal also raised the question whether widow prostitution and their premature abortion were favoured by the sastras. It asked the conservative thinkers to perform the widow re-marriage outside their family if they considered it against sastras and not to hamper others when they performed re-marriages. Periyar E. V. R wrote in the Kudi Arasu that there was no connection between widow re-marriage and sastras and the time was being wasted in
tracing the connection. He supplemented that instead of wasting time, we could have done some path-breaking things.  

The age old conventions and *sastras* measured the chastity only against women. It was believed that men’s error did not affect the chastity whereas even a single mistake of women would blemish their chastity. Hence the *Grihalakshini* chronicled its strong observation that it was imprudent to believe that the re-marriage would affect the chastity of women.  

Periyar E.V.Ramasamy wrote strongly in the *Kudi Arasu* that the society which accepted widowhood directly, encouraged and approved prostitution indirectly.  

**Sexual Inequality**

Majority of journals damned the inequality between men and women concerning widow re-marriage. If the wife passed away, the husband prepared himself for his next marriage straight away. In some cases even if the wife was alive, the husband was permitted by the society to get re-married. At the same time, the society put a number of obstacles for a widow to get re-married. The lopsided condition was strongly condemned by the *Nattkottai Vaisyan*. Even the *Anandha Bodhini*, the conservative journal in the initial stages, strongly condemned it. The *Grihalakshmi* observed that the widowhood was forced only on the women community and there was a traditional thinking in the society that widowhood was mandated only for the women community. It supplemented that there was no equivalent term in Tamil for widower. It called upon the broad-minded thinkers to axe the term *Vidhavai* (widow). The *Kumaran* recorded its censure of differential treatment in which widows should follow the life of celibacy while many men were involved in several marriages. The *Anandha Vikatan* published statistical data to show that the number of widows in Madras Presidency was 40,91,962 and the number of widowers was 9,28,756 and it observed that it would be convenient if the widow re-marriage were to take place. Thus the press toiled hard to advocate gender equality on the question of re-marriage.

**Home Imprisonment**

Isolation and internment of widows inside the dwelling was considered the manifest destiny. It was the compulsion of the time for widows not to see the outer world and settle in the murky corners of the house. The *Anandha Vikatan* expressed its anguish that it was very hard to exercise their desires because widows were confined to home. It suggested that the *sastras* could be amended in favour of widows and as per the
amendment, the widows could be allowed to move liberally in the world outside. This proved that the journal was not in support of negating the sastras while striving hard for the well being of widows. The Stri-Dharma remarked that if widows were not provided improved future, it was not possible to taste the power of political independence.

END NOTES

5. Kudi Arasu, 2 August 1925.
9. Ibid., Journal 4, 1911.
10. Ibid.
12. Uthamapathini means wife of high morale, who strictly followed the traditional rules of wifehood.
15. Ibid., July 1932, pp.63-66.
17. Kudi Arasu, 21 September 1930, p.3.
18. Ibid., 27 October 1929, p.11.
20. Ibid., 29 March 1931, p.5.
21. Ibid., 29 March 1931, p.5.
22. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
27. Kudi Arasu, 27 October 1929, p.11.
29. Kudi Arasu, 28 April 1935.
32. Giruhalakshmi, 1 January 1940, pp.30-31.
33. Kumaran, Annual Souvenir, 1928.
34. Ananda Vikatan, February 1927, p.36.
35. Ibid., July 1926, p.225.