



## PRESS ON THE PROBLEMS OF WIDOWHOOD

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In the Madras Presidency the deep-rooted conservative ideas among the dominant sections resulted in many social evils such as Devadasi System, Child-Marriage and Forced Widowhood. Among the social evils, forced widowhood affected a major fraction of the women society. The period also witnessed a few social reformers who fought against this evil in favour of the affected women. At Madras, Veerasalingam Pantalu and his followers celebrated the first widow remarriage in June 1883 in spite of strong orthodox opposition.<sup>1</sup> The extreme painful suffering for the women community in Tamil Nadu was widowhood. The dictionary defines widow as a woman whose husband is dead and who has not remarried and a widower as a man whose wife is dead and who has not married again. Generally speaking, widowhood is a state of being a widow or a widower.<sup>2</sup> But the problem in Tamil Nadu was that the state of widowhood was forced only on women

### PROBLEMS OF WIDOWHOOD

In India widowhood was not just transition from one marital status to another after the death of the husband. Entering into widowhood is more hazardous, painful and humiliating to women than to a widower because of the discrimination and the ritual sanctions of the society against widows. With the result, widows not only suffer social and economic sanctions but also face many psychological consequences, loneliness, and in many cases deprivation causing emotional disturbances and imbalance.<sup>3</sup> Widowhood was the phase of despair in the life for most women. Widowhood hence was also a dreaded time of life. Depending on her caste and age at widowhood, a woman could expect to face numerous of hardships.<sup>4</sup> There were different categories of widows: the aged, the destitute, the young and even widows of tender age and each category of widows had its own problems.<sup>5</sup>

Usually widows were forced to wear white dresses, which were for easy identification. They were forcibly tonsured. They were secluded and placed in the murky corners of the homes. They might experience the wrenching emotional pain of losing a loved spouse. They could often be considered by others to be dangerously inauspicious.<sup>6</sup> They struggled with her bodily affairs frequently, and when the widows were unable to contend with their feelings, and they killed themselves. It was a lifelong chastisement forced on the widow for the mistake not committed by her. They would be pressed by her kin to avoid non vegetarian food, eat rice usually only once a

day (a quantity that left her almost fasting); keep away from bodily adornments; and live in enduring celibacy.<sup>7</sup> In this situation re-marriage was considered naturally and justly as the only means to rescue the widows from these types of sufferings.

## PRESS ON THE PROBLEMS OF WIDOWHOOD

*The Hindu* reported that G. Subramania Iyer conducted the remarriage of his daughter who became a widow at the age of twelve before consummation. It was held on December 1889 at the venue of the Fifth Indian National Congress Session at Bombay. Consequently, his friends and relatives at Madras deserted him.<sup>8</sup>

The *Swadesamitran* viewed thus: “As a result of the sustained campaign, widow remarriage took place both in Brahmin and non-Brahmin families. G. Subramania Iyer published many articles on the necessity for abolishing infanticide also.”<sup>9</sup>

The *Stri-Dharma* considered that the culmination of a women’s agony was in her widowhood.<sup>10</sup> In India widowhood was not just transition from one marital status to another after the death of the husband. Entering into widowhood is more hazardous, painful and humiliating to women than to a widower because of the discrimination and the ritual sanctions of the society against widows.

The *Grihalakshmi* observed that among the women movements, widow re-marriage was the paramount issue, which had to compulsorily given to the women community.<sup>11</sup>

*Stri-Dharma* observed that there was perhaps no Brahmin house in Tamil Nadu without a widow, and there was no widow who but cherishes a sorrow in her heart.<sup>12</sup> In the Brahmin community, widows were tonsured and dressed with white in white *saree*.<sup>13</sup> They were kept in the gloomy nook of the house. They were distanced from the worldly affairs, and thus even from sunlight. They were considered a symbol of misfortunes and sorrows. They were called *amangalis* (inauspicious beings). Orthodox people did not allow them to attend sacred ceremonies of the family and society. The rules of *sastras* were forced on them, while Eurasian women or Muslim women were exempted.<sup>14</sup> The widows among the lower castes suffer different type of disabilities. Among the lower castes widow remarriage was not prohibited; yet there was some aversion towards it. One important aspect among the lower castes which caused hardship to the widows was the type of family in which the widows lived.<sup>15</sup>

*Kudi Arasu*, published by E.V.R. remarked that the sufferings of a widow, was an everlasting suffering and imperishable pain.<sup>16</sup>

The *Vaisya Mitran* highlighted an incident where a widow who came from Madurai, gave birth to a female child in a municipal toilet in Madras and abandoned the child. She was arrested and sent to court.<sup>17</sup> This was an unusual incident. A widow giving birth to a child was considered as a social sin. So she had come to Madras secretly to escape the criticism and slander of the society.

The *Kumaran* revealed the fact that 92% of widows who gave birth to a child committed suicide.<sup>18</sup> Apart from caste oppressions, the sufferings of the widows varied due to the age factor. An old widow was much better off than a child widow or a childless widow.<sup>19</sup> Although widow re-marriage had been legalized since 1856, it remained an uncommon practice in Tamil Nadu even by 1929.<sup>20</sup>

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 periodical raised the question as to what was the crime the children had committed, and for what crime were they suffering this social chastisement. The questions of the *journal* changed the perception of the public towards the problem of widows.<sup>21</sup> The orthodox people criticized such as anti-public.

The *Kumaran* continued to campaign and bravely wrote that they were ready to carry the title given by the orthodox people, if the widows could see a dawn in their life.<sup>22</sup>

The *Arya Dharmam*, a conservative *journal* observed that the strong-minded woman certainly would go for sati and only the less determined women would opt for widowhood.<sup>23</sup> The *Viveka Bodhini* observed conservatively that the *uthamapathinis*<sup>24</sup> would die herself immediately after the death of her husband and those who could not die so would go for sati and those who could not opt the both would go for widowhood.<sup>25</sup> It indirectly suggested that death was the only way to flee painful widowhood. The *journal Ananda Bodhini* openly wrote against widow re-marriage in 1918.<sup>26</sup> But during the course of time it changed its view on widow re-marriage. It pointed out that in olden days women were given freedom to opt sati or widowhood, and similarly they could be given the freedom for re-marriage.<sup>27</sup>

*Nattukkottai Vaisyam* condemned the system of forced widowhood as inhuman and said it was worse than the cruel practice of Sati.<sup>28</sup> *Kudi Arasu* expressed its different view to describe the sufferings of the widows to the world, sati was painful for one day, whereas widowhood was painful for a lifetime.<sup>29</sup>

Periyar E.V.R wrote in *Kudi Arasu* that there was no connection between widow re-marriage and *sastras* and time was being wasted in tracing a non-existent connection. He supplemented that instead of wasting time, one could do breathtaking things.<sup>30</sup>

*Grihalakshmi* observed that widowhood was forced only on women community and there was a traditional thinking in the society that widowhood was related only with 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).<sup>31</sup>

*Kumaran* raised a question why widows should follow a life of celibacy while many men involved in several marriages.<sup>32</sup> *Anandha Vikatan* published a statistical data that the number of widows in Madras Presidency was 40,91,962 and the number of widowers was 9,28,756 and it told its longing that it would be immense joy and freedom if the widow re-marriage would be in practice.<sup>33</sup>

*Madhar Marumanam* was a *journal* published from Karaikudi from 1936. The Tamil heading itself means widow re-marriage. This was the only *journal* which worked only for the cause of widow re-marriage. Every part of the *journal* was meant for widow re-marriage. It replicated the views of Gandhi supporting of widow re-marriage that enforcing widowhood on thousands of women was equivalent to sit on the mines of bombs, and one could not forecast the accurate time of the danger.<sup>34</sup> With the intention of re-marriage propagation, the journal published an advertisement for a pencil, in which the phrase “widow remarriage will offer liberty” was printed. It shows that the journal followed the technique of modern days even in 1940s.<sup>35</sup>

*Madhar Marumanam* asked its readers to gather and forward the following particulars for the purpose of widow re-marriage propagation. It asked for the number of widows, their place of residence, the liberal thinkers in the midst of them, various rituals of the demography related to forced widowhood and widow re-marriages that took place in a particular region. It asked the readers to forward the photographs of re-married pair to be printed in the *journal* for creating awareness in the society.<sup>36</sup> Thus, it tried to generate public opinion and use popular opinion for the right thing. When a section of the people began supporting widow re-marriages, their support had their own limitations. A woman, who became widow before attaining her puberty could be re-married, a widow without children could be remarried, a widow who had not experienced pregnancy could be re-married, a widow below the age of twenty five could be re-married, a widow below the age of twenty five could be remarried, a widow could be remarried within their community and linguistic cluster, a widow could be married only with the widower were some of the limitations evolved in the minds according to the circumstances. Some open minded persons had a radical thought that until the number of widows were exhausted; there should be no marriage for the virgin girls. Some broad minded people had far-reaching thought that the re-marriages could be performed without any limitation. The *journal* enlisted such limitations and asked for the readers’ opinion. It stood firmly in its stand of performing widow re-marriages, even though there were various obstacles.<sup>37</sup> It circulated news from abroad that the social organizations frequently offered prizes and praises to the re-married women. While reporting the news, the *journal* requested the local organizations to conduct widow re-marriages in the western replica.<sup>38</sup>

*Madhar Marumanam*, followed the modus operandi of using day today life illustrations frequently to make public the sufferings of the widows. The following is the popular illustration “If the climber snake-guard lost its supporting stick, try to offer them the supporting sticks. Unless the snake-guards become putrid, the price will come down”. Indicating the Census Report of 1931, the *journal* wrote that there were twenty five million women suffering in India like the support less climbers. It requested the society to provide them the supporting stick of re-marriage.<sup>39</sup> The same *journal* published the various social taboos imposed on widows: they could not touch the deities and perform coconut breaking ceremony in temples. But the *journal* insisted a much needed order should be passed by which the socio industry could be prohibited from creating huge number of widows. It appealed to

the society to perform re-marriages for existing widows and transform the colours of their dress.<sup>40</sup> It published one more example taken from the daily life that there was an oil lamp without flame, the lamp-filament was well prepared, the match-box was also ready, a young man also was ready to light up and there should be no hesitation in illuminating the lamp. It raised a rousing question if the lamp once lost its flame; was it impossible to have the flame again? It was idiotic to blame the darkness while preventing the lighting up the lamp. Thus it blamed the fundamentalists who prevented widow re-marriages.<sup>41</sup>

## SERVICE ORGANISATIONS FOR WIDOWS

The *journals* often eulogized the activities of the service organizations for the widows. They gave extensive space to publicise their activities with the intention of creating awareness among the public. *Vidhava Vivaha Sahaya Sabha* (Widow Remarriage Association), a well known organization established a home for widows in Theagaraya Nagar in Madras. In a short period, 247 widows became its members. The organisation, campaigned for widow re-marriage. It published Tamil, Telugu and English books to propagate its ideas. Due to the service and campaign of the organization 15 widow re-marriages were performed in Madras city in one year.

*Ananda Bodhini* praised the remarkable activities and solicited others to work for the noble cause.<sup>42</sup> The organization established Sri Gangaram Widow Bhavan as provisional residence for widows who were ready to re-marry. The mentioned *journal* asked the organization to set up such homes in every town.<sup>43</sup> With the intention of encouraging other social service organizations to work for widows' welfare, the *journal* published such news. The *Kudi Arasu* much-admired the praised work done by the organization such as organising thirty widow re-marriages in the year 1928, 50 in 1932 and 40 in 1933 and the publication of awareness pamphlets in seven different languages in the province for the righteous crusade.<sup>44</sup> *Grihalakshmi* urged the public to hold up the works of the organization in campaigning for widow re-marriage.<sup>45</sup>

*Kudi Arasu* motivated the formation of another organization, *Pengal Nilayam* (Women's Centre) for organising widow re-marriages and to generate consciousness among masses on the widow re-marriage.<sup>46</sup>

Veerasingam Panthulu was a social activist who worked for the cause of widow re-marriage in the Telugu areas of Madras Presidency. In 1898, he built a home for the widows in Madras which housed a school as well as a hostel.<sup>47</sup> Extolling his work, *The Indian Patriot* wrote that the public opinion was in favour of widow remarriage, and Veeresalingam Panthulu was the moving spirit for this. It also requested the social activists of other areas to follow his means.<sup>48</sup> A widows' home called Sarada Home was run by Subbulakshmi from 1919. Formerly she was a child widow, and then became a graduate. For an improved life of widows, education and training were given to them in the home, Her altruistic work, earned her a pet name '*Akka*' (elder sister). The United India and Native States applauded her work, and pleaded the well-off to donate generously to the Sarada Home for the noble cause.<sup>49</sup> The activists considered the words of the press as recognition for their work These in turn became a morale booster for the forthcoming liberalists.

There was another institution called Sen Sadan that served widows in Madras. It gave asylum to the poor women including widows, educating them and giving training for their livelihood. *Stri-Dharma* encouraged the organization by publishing its activities.<sup>50</sup> *Indian Ladies Magazine* remarked that the Seva Sadan taught the women including widows, lace work, needle work, sowing, cutting, weaving, embroidery and rattan work, so that a widow, on leaving the premises after completing her course was equipped to take care of her own livelihood. The *journal* also published the photographs of these activities.<sup>51</sup> The wide publicity and moral support encouraged by the press reinforced the organizations to continue the services more effectively.

There were a number of *journals* in Tamil Nadu that worked for the improved well-being of the widows. Among them *Madhar Marumanam* and *Kudi Arasu* contributed praiseworthy service to the cause. The press could achieve its goal of creating confidence in the minds of widows, unclutteredness in the minds of the parents and responsiveness in the minds of the public.

#### End Note:

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5. Adinarayan Reddy, *op.cit.*, p.3
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7. *Ibid.*
8. *The Hindu*, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1891
9. *Swadesamitran*, 21<sup>th</sup> June 1890
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11. *Grihalakshmi*, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1938, pp.25-26
12. *Stri-Dharma*, April 1929, p.260
13. *Kudi Arasu*, 30<sup>th</sup> August 1931, p.5
14. *Tamizhan*, 24<sup>th</sup> July 1912; Aloysius, G., *Ayothidasar Chindhanaigal*, Vol.I, Folklore Resources and Research Centre, Palayamkottai, 1999, p.699
15. Adinarayan Reddy, *op.cit.*, p.3
16. *Kudi Arasu*, 6<sup>th</sup> September 1931, p.15
17. *Vaisya Mitran*, 21<sup>th</sup> July 1961, p.11
18. *Kumaran*, Annual Souvenir, 1928
19. Vijay Agnew, *Elite Women in Indian Politics*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 1979, p.24
20. Mythili Srinivas, *Wives, Widows and Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2008, p.83
21. *Kudi Arasu*, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1925
22. *Kumaran*, November - December 1930, pp.185-188
23. *Arya Dharmam*, June, 1928, p.528
24. *Uthamapathini* means wife of high morale, who strictly followed the traditional rules of wifehood.
25. *Viveka Bodhini*, December 1916, pp.213-216
26. *Ananda Bodhini*, Vol.3, 1918, pp.67-69
27. *Ibid.*, July 1932, pp.63-66
28. *Nattukkottai Vaisyan*, May-June 1917, p.604
29. *Kudi Arasu*, 21<sup>st</sup> September 1930, p.3
30. *Kudi Arasu*, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1929, p.11
31. *Giruhalakshmi*, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1940, pp.30-31
32. *Kumaran*, Annual Souvenir, 1928
33. *Ananda Vikatan*, February 1927, p.36
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36. *Madhar Marumanam*, October-November 1936, p.46
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44. *Kudi Arasu*, 29<sup>th</sup> December 1935, p.8
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46. *Kudi Arasu* , 21<sup>st</sup> April 1935; p.9 and 28 April 1935, p.17
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