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Grandma, Widowhood and Her Family

By Prateeti Ghosh¹

Abstract

The Sati Abolition Act (1829) followed by the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act (1856) could not wholly eradicate the discrimination against Bengali widows in their own families. After almost 300 years, in the 21st century, as it is witnessed by the narrator, in a few Hindu Bengali patriarchal traditional families, widows are deprived of their basic human rights such as choice of food, clothing etc. Discrimination against widows i.e., gender inequality, as a matter of fact, originates from her own family or the in-laws' family. To eradicate inequality, awareness education should be given to both the victims as well as her family members, so that, a balanced and developed society can be formed.

Keywords: Hindu Bengali widows, Restrictions on widows, Gender inequality

Introduction

Even after the enactment of the Sati Abolition Act (1829) and the subsequent Hindu Widow Remarriage Act (1856), it is a matter of doubt how much freedom and dignity of life the Hindu Bengali Widows hold today, even in the 21st Century, in our country. The practice of immolation of a Hindu widow in her husband's funeral pyre was called Sati, which was counted as a proof of her devotion and loyalty to her husband. Many widows were made Sati and burnt alive until the Bengal Sati Regulation made the practice of Sati illegal. It was the first major social reform legislation as well as the beginning of the fight for women's rights in British India. The next major social reform legislation Hindu Widow Remarriage Act legalised the remarriage of widows in British India. As the widows were expected and forced to live a life of austerity and deprivation of the self, this Act justified widow remarriage to make widows free from oppressions and sufferings as well as to eliminate superstitions and discrimination prevalent in the Hindu society.

Contemporary Bengali society has not yet been able to remove the various causes and traces of gender inequality, in spite of continuous and persistent efforts made over a long time. Taking into consideration only the Hindu Bengali widows, it has been observed that, in many cases, they, as victims of gender inequality, suffer from discriminatory practices within their own families. Age-old practices, customs and superstitious beliefs are deep-rooted in many so-called educated Bengali families, due to lack of knowledge and progressive mindset, even in this era.

Subject Matter

Being born in such a traditional, conservative, educated Hindu family, various incidents seemed shocking since childhood. With the passing of time, those incidents gradually became meaningful to me.

“-Why does the elderly female relative wear only white sarees?
-Why does she eat alone and separately?

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-And why does she eat only vegetarian food whereas other members of the family eat both vegetarian and non-vegetarian?"

Such questions were met with vague answers which did not clarify my doubts.

With time, somehow I gained the knowledge that the reason behind this type of lifestyle was the untimely death of her husband. Various questions cropped up in my mind. "Why, then, did a male relative, who was a part of the same family, not have to change his clothing and food habits after his wife's death?" It became clear that the rules of widowhood were applicable only and only for the women, and not for the men. And, for this sole reason, the widowed female relative had to adhere to so many restrictions:

- i) Rice consumption was prohibited more than once a day.
- ii) Moreover, once a year, spanning a few consecutive days, it was forbidden for her to eat cooked food. Age, illness, problems regarding digestion—no matter what the problem, she was not permitted to have anything except fruits and some cold, stale food. She used to wait for those days anxiously. And, when those days would start, she would pass those days suffering from hunger; being a Bengali girl, since childhood, she was accustomed to having rice meals every day; being deprived of having even a small quantity of rice, she would suffer a lot. Yet, she had to keep on following such unscientific rules on a daily basis.
- iii) She had to fast on various occasions throughout the year.
- iv) She was restricted to a vegetarian diet and was not even allowed to have vegetables like onion and garlic.
- v) She was also forbidden to wear colourful sarees, earrings etc. Since such age-old superstitions, fear of society etc. were deep-rooted in her own mind itself, her lifestyle could not be modified in spite of persistent persuasion. But, what is society? It is constituted by some people. And, these people are her family members. She used to cook both vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes for that so-called educated family and used to live in constant fear lest she tastes the non-vegetarian dishes while cooking: "It would be a sinful act" for her. After cooking she used to serve those non-vegetarian items to everyone, which she had no right to consume. She was my grandma. But she was not the only one; I have seen several other grandmothers in our extended family who were being discriminated against in the same way.

Meanwhile, I came to know that, in many upper and middle-class educated Bengali families, widowed women live their life with freedom and without any restrictions. Moreover, in an enlightened traditional family, widowhood has not made the lives of the widowed women dull, colourless and restrictive. They are accustomed to the same lifestyle, even after the deaths of their husbands, as was before. Why should a woman, who is used to wearing red clothes since childhood, be forced to stop wearing red after her husband's demise? Naturally, there arises the question--- why this discrimination among the widowed women? I realized that all the customs and rules of widowhood are a byproduct of the human mind. These have no scientific or logical basis. Hence, in spite of the starkly-different lifestyles of two widowed women, the one who is not leading a restricted life has no imaginary fear of sin.

Why then, in the 21st century, is it necessary to change the lifestyles and food habits of some Bengali Hindu widows whereas the widowers do not need to change anything? Every individual, male or female, has the right to eat as he/she wishes to, as a basic human right in

India. To stop this discrimination, the first thing needed is proper education. Social reformers initiated various movements with the help of British authorities in order to eliminate regressive social customs, superstitions, social evils and discrimination against women. But the discrimination continues even in the 21st century. Nowadays there is a strong influence of social media campaigns in changing the attitudes and mindset of people and in raising awareness of women's rights, equality and justice. Women need to learn about their fundamental rights so that they can raise their voice against discrimination and fight for gender equality. The propagation of proper education will give rise to the awareness that, in order to be a good dutiful wife, or, for the welfare of the family, it is not mandatory to change her food habit and lifestyle after the demise of her husband. Needless to say, education will bring economic independence which is vital for women to establish their opinions.

Another female relative, who is also highly esteemed, being the daughter-in-law of another traditional family, has lived life on her own terms. Apart from a successful career, she was also adept at running her family, fulfilling all duties. This had been possible because of the modern perspective of her father, who emphasised higher education and economic independence of his daughter instead of only preparing her for marriage. In erstwhile times such an instance was rare and that is why he had to face opposition from members of his extended family—in those times it was the norm to marry off girls at a very young age and without providing them with even primary education.

Conclusion

Here comes into play the deciding factor—“the role of attitude, mindset and perspective of the family”. In other words, a woman who has to establish herself requires the support of the family, i.e., it is not possible for her to establish herself from her childhood only through her own efforts. Just like women need supportive parents before marriage in order to move forward with economic independence, after marriage also, they need their husbands' support. Moreover, in the absence of the husband, the awareness and support of the extended family, of which they are a part, is just as important for them. Then only can widowed women live their lives fully with dignity and freedom.

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