

Reformist Age of Modern Indian History with special reference to Maharishi Dayanand Saraswati's Approach towards Widow -Remarriage in Rajasthan

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Rajasthan was directly influenced by the social reform movements of Arya Samaj in the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹ Arya Samaj attempted to free off religion from unnecessary traditions and customs thus establishing a society which was inspired by its own. The social reform movement of Arya Samaj in Rajasthan was basically related with improving the condition of women in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Major problems were Sati, female infanticide sale and purchase of women, illiteracy, purdah child marriage unsuitable marriage polygamy, prohibition of widow remarriage etc. Dayanand always considered this declining condition of women the major cause for social decline. Arya Samaj started its movement basically to improve the condition of women thus attempting to provide them with equal status as men. The reformist approach of Arya samaj towards women gained support upto some extent by the contemporary intellectual class thus making the feminist reform movement, comprehensive.

Dayanand declared that he had come to the world to break the chains of slavery and free mankind from error, superstition, ignorance, domination of all kinds ecclesiastical social and economic.²

Widow remarriage was prohibited among the Hindus. Due to the custom of child marriage many girls became widows at an early age, some even in their childhood. In India there were two types of widows -

(A) Child widows whose husbands died in their childhood.

(B) Those widows who had undergone sexual intercourse with their husbands and who have become widows in their post puberty phase.

The condition of widows in the society was deplorable. They were forced to spend their whole life in widowhood. They were not permitted to join auspicious ceremonies and their presence in such functions was considered to be a great sin. They were devoid of social pleasures and privileges which others enjoyed. It is not possible to describe the conditions of torcher, which the widows had to undergo, as per the old traditions and customs of Hindu society. Many widows, who could not tolerate this, started accepting Islam or Christianity as widow remarriage was not prohibited in these.³ Dayanand was in favour of remarriage of the first type of widows. In his own words- "A man or a woman who has simply gone through the ceremony of joining hands but whose marriage has not been consummated, is entitled to re-marry. But re-marriage is absolutely prohibited in the case of a twice born man or woman (i.e one belonging to Brahman Kshatriya or Vaishya) who has had sexual intercourse with his or her consort."⁴ Swami Dayanand had taken a revolutionary step by propounding '*Niyoga*' as an alternative of the remarriage of the widows and widowers. According to him a widow could cohabit with her husband's brothers and thus produce children. By this, disputes related with inheritance and property could be avoided.⁵ But later Dayanand also accepted that in his speeches that "A widow remarriage could be done if she herself desires so, otherwise not."⁶

The social structure in Rajasthan was based on staunch orthodoxy principles and traditions, in the nineteenth century. The condition of women had deteriorated and a constant increment in child widows was apparent. There were 32 child widows per 100 widows of Rajputana out of which, the number belonging to Brahmin and Jain community was high.⁷ It was not possible for Arya Samaj to run the movement of '*Niyoga*' in such circumstances then it started widow remarriage movement to provide child widow with some social status. Prohibition of widow remarriage, was considered to be a symbol of cultural tradition and social status,

among reputed families of Rajasthan.⁸ On the other hand, among lower class society, widow remarriage was popular by the names like *Nata*, *Dhareja* and *Kareva* etc.

(A) *Nata* marriage could also be done on abandonment of woman by their husbands, but after taking the permission of their caste panchayats. This mode of remarriage was popular among the *Rajputs*, *Jats*, *Malis*, *Gurjars*, *Kumhars*, *Gair Meena*, *Bhils* etc.

(B) *Dhareja* made of marriage was popular among Jat, Meena, Ahir and Gurjars. In this the father of the widow was to leave her daughter at her second husband's place during night time.

(C) *Kareva* custom was popular among Meos, Chamars and similar tribes. It was possible only after one year of the husband's death. In this the widow could remarry someone from her *Sasural's* side only.⁹

(D) '*Jhagda Pratha*' (another mode of widow remarriage) was popular among castes like *Regar*, *Mochi* (Cobbler), *Dhobi* (Washerman) and *Nai* (Barber), according to which, father of the widow was given some amount by her new husband.¹⁰

Big ceremonies and expenditures were avoided in these widow remarriages. Even the custom of '*Pheras*' (*Saptasadi*) was not performed. Tax was realized on *Nata* and widow remarriages in states like Udaipur, Jaipur, Jodhpur and Kota etc. by the government and the children produced as a result of this marriage were also recognized legally.¹¹ But, against this, Arya Samaj used to perform widow remarriage by following Vedic customs and by performing ceremonies like *Pheras* etc.¹²

Arya Samaj Jhalwar, established 'Jhalawar Seva Samiti' in 1919 for propagating widow remarriages, at Jhalawar. The children produced as a result of widow remarriage were given the right of inheritance which was recognised by the state and was called '*Taruka*'.¹³ The number of child widows was good among Rajasthan Marwari Samaj including Agarwal, Oswal, Jain, Khandelwal and Maheshwari etc. Satyadeva Vidyalkar propagated widow remarriage among *Marwaris* by publishing social reformist articles in a Monthly Journal namely 'Rajasthan' which

was published from Akola. After 1920, Jain society, Rajputana Marwari State Agarwal Panchayat, Rajputana Women Association, Bhargava Samaj, Kayastha Samaj etc. also supported Arya Samaj in propagating the thought of widow remarriage.¹⁴ Arya samaj Ajmer, in order to improve the condition of the widow and helpless women, to give them protection and to make themselves dependant, established the first Vidhwa Ashram alongwith taking eight widows at Dayanand Ashram. Ladies abandoned by Muslim community were also given admission here.¹⁵

Widow remarriage was prohibited among Hindhu society of Alwar state and there was a law that if anybody tried to perform such an act, he was to be exited from the state. Arya Samaj used to send widows at Bandiqui and Delhi for getting remarried due to the enforcement of this law in the state. In 1924, the widow of the brother of Ganeshmal got remarried with Chotelal Arya following the Vedic custom, as a result Maharaja Jaisingh issued orders that 'If the couple is the follower of *Sanatan* religion, then strict punishment must be inflicted upon them, but if they are Arya Samajists, then they must be exiled from the state.'¹⁶ As a result, Chotelal had to abandon the state and go to Delhi alongwith his wife, within a duration of forty-eight hours.¹⁷

The educated middle class Arya Samajists of Ajmer personally collected public funds and got established 'Vanita Ashram' at Jatiawas, Ajmer on April 1926. The objectives behind its establishment were -

- (A) To provide refuge to needy and helpless.
- (B) To prevent them from accepting other religions.

They were made self dependant and rehabilitated in the society. It was all started with thirty-five women. At the end of the first year, the ashram Safeguarded 153 of such women.¹⁸ One of the best features of this *ashram* was, that these women were not forced for getting remarried instead stress was laid on improving their standard of living and providing them with facilities of education thus making them self-dependant. Women here were kept in three catagories-

- (A) Those who were helpless

- (B) Those who were not consuming goods given in charity, after giving Rs.10/- per month.
- (C) Those who used to meet their expenditure on their own.

A widow was remarried only if she desired so.¹⁹ This Aashram conducted widow-remarriage of 7 women in 1926-27, of 37 women from 1928-34 and of 64 such widows from 1936-47. According to the Census of 1941, there were 19,000 widows in Rajputana.²⁰ Similar institutions were established in other regions of Rajasthan like Jodhpur, Kota, Bandiqui, Phulera, Nagore, Bikaner, Jhalawar etc. in the second and third decade of the twentieth century. Branches of 'Gangaram Widow Help Association, Lahor'²¹ were opened at Ajmer and Jodhpur.

For the purpose of improving the condition of widows, a monthly magazine called '*Vidhwa-Bandhu*' was published from Lahore in 1926, by Widow Remarriage Help Society conducted by Sir Gangaram Trust Society. Another monthly namely '*Vidhwa-Hiteshi*' was also published from Lahore itself.²²

Bandiqui Arya samaj, conducted remarriage of Smt. Meerabai Brahamani, who was a child widow with Pandit Ramgopal Sharma on 4th July 1928 AD. On this occasion, a group of around five to six hundred people was present. In order to encourage widow remarriages in Maheshwari caste, an All India Vaishya Sabha was organised under the Chairmanship of Sh. Harbilas Sarda, at Bareilly, in which Widow Remarriage Ordinance was passed.²³ According to an article published in '*Arya Martand*' with heading '*Ajmer mein Vidhwa Vivah ki Dhoom*', it was depicted that widow remarriages numbering 41, were conducted by the *Ashram* in 1929-30. Arya Samaj institutions of Shahpura, Sambhar, Bharatpur, Bikaner, Bandiqui, Jodhpur etc also conducted works like this. 22 widows were remarried in their own castes and in accordance with their choice, at Sir Gangaram Vidhwa Bhawan, Ajmer while 11 widows got remarried outside the Vivah Bhawan with the assistance of associate workers.²⁴

Durgaprasad, a minister of Arya Samaj performed the remarriage of his widow daughter with a man belonging to Khandelwal Vaishya community at Delhi in March 1929.²⁵ Hindu

Widows Right of Inheritance Bill was presented before Legislative Assembly by Harbilas Sarda on 26th September 1930. Its role aim was the restoration of the ownership rights to the widows after the death of their husbands to improve their deteriorating condition and legally entitled them to be the owners of their husband's share in the family property. If the widows re-married, then their property should be reverted to their previous husband's heirs. This Bill not only sought the public opinion but was also supported by majority votes in the house.²⁶

In 1930, a Brahmin Widow got remarried to Badri Prasad Brahmin.²⁷ The Judicial Minister of Alwar banned the remarriage of her sister by saying that it was against Hindu Shastras.²⁸

Even in this atmosphere of discrepancy Krishna Jasraj and Dr.Ranga Baksh tried to establish '*Vidhwa Sahayak Sabha*' (Widow Help Association) in the state but the Maharaja got it closed declaring it to be against Hindu *Dharma Shastras*.²⁹ The Alwar Maharaja visited Europe in 1932 and after that his view point regarding widow remarriage changed a lot. Widow Help Association was the first institution which performed more than hundred widow-remarriages during 1935-1949, thus spreading social awareness.³⁰ In Bikaner state, widow-remarriage was not so common among upper castes but it existed among lower caste society as it was helpful in providing means of subsistence to the helpless and needy widows. Arya Samaj got conducted a widow remarriage on 2nd April 1932 at Shri Ganganagar, which was the Thikana of Bikaner. A teacher namely Chandrabhanu always for remarriage.³¹

The state of Bharatpur had far more liberal attitude towards widow-remarriage as compared to that of Alwar. The king himself gave stately support to the efforts of Arya Samaj. 14 out of 100 women at Bharatpur were widows and this percentage was higher in the lower class society.³² Articles like '*Vidhwa Vivah*' by Pandit Jaydeva Sharma '*Vidhyalankar*'³³ and stories like '*Vidhwa*' etc in *Arya Martand* expressed the sufferings and pains of the widows.³⁴ On the occasion of the annual functions of Arya Samaj, at Bharatpur on Dec.25th 1925, Maharaja Kishansingh made a declaration that regulation would be made against child marriage and children produced as a

result of widow-remarriage would be recognised legally looking at the efforts of Arya Samaj. As a result Widow-Remarriage Act was passed in Oct.1926.³⁵

Widow-Remarriage movement of Arya Samaj remained symbolic at other places of Rajasthan like Jaipur, Marwar and Bikaner. Arya-Samajists propagated widow remarriage in the '*Thikanas*' of Jaipur. They conducted the remarriage of the Kantidevi Brahmin with Surajmal Arya on March 25th 1933 at Ajmer.³⁶ Similarly, in January 1937, an intercaste widow remarriage was conducted by '*Vidhwa Ashram*' Ajmer. The groom belonged to Brahmin caste while the bride was of *Balai* community.³⁷ The brother of Shri Fojmalji, a minister of Arya Samaj, got married with a widow of his own caste. Fojmalji had agreed for this marriage as it provided refuge and means of subsistence to the needy widow, but their caste *Panchayat* decided fined him of Rs.250/- to the and leave Barmer for ever only then could he remain in the caste otherwise not. He considered it better to abandon the caste³⁸ in the same way a Jain youth of Phalodi region, Marwar was exiled from his caste and village after he got married to a widow.³⁹

In 1946, Shardulsingh of Shriganganar, a *Thikana* of Bikaner recognized widow remarriage by making legislation.⁴⁰ Jaipur State passed Widow Remarriage Act in April 1948, which recognised legally the children born as a result of Widow Remarriage and provided widows with the right to inherit the property of their dead husbands.⁴¹ Thus, attempts were made all over Rajasthan to make widow remarriage movement popular among the masses.

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