



BOOK REVIEW

Widows in India

Social Neglect and Public Action

Edited by Martha Alter Chen

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WIDOWS in India face multiple, often conflicting, social expectations. Their status is defined by a complex and diverse host of religion-based personal codes, regional, *jati*, kin-based customs, and government laws. The condition of widows in different groups, cultural areas and classes are therefore vastly different. A new anthology, *Widows in India: Social Neglect and Public Action*, assembles papers produced for a conference on this topic held in 1994 in Bangalore.

In addition to the standard academic, NGO and bureaucratic types one would expect to find involved, widows actively participated in efforts to improve their own status. Edited and with an introduction by Martha Alter Chen, the overall tone of most articles in the collection is cool, clinical and complex. Nevertheless, taking a cue from Chen's activist orientation in her introduction, the volume includes a great deal of useful information that serves as a basis for its policy recommendations.

There are an unusually large number of widows in India – over 33 million, or eight percent of the female population. Widowhood confers a peculiar new struggle on women, rife with contradictions: they are expected to conform to an enormous burden of

restrictive customs that marginalise them from their community and family, while at the same time they often end up as the sole source of material and emotional support for their children and other family members. These constraints make it exceedingly difficult for women to effectively function as legitimate breadwinners and household heads, commanding enough income to take care of their family's needs.

Thematically arranged into five sections, *Widows in India* explores crucial questions of aging, morbidity and mortality, social security, poverty, employment and public advocacy, taking into account the symbolic and material consequences of widowhood.

In the first essay, Uma Chakravarti delineates the discursive meaning of widowhood in some important traditions in Hindu society. According to one strong strand of conservative religious opinion — usually anchored in misconstrued interpretations of the *Dharma Shastras*, such as the *Manu-Smriti* — Hindu women were historically considered responsible for ensuring the physical and moral salvation of males, especially in their role as wives. As such they were ideally expected to integrate values like eternal devotion and service to their husband

in order to gain long life, health and spiritual benefits on his behalf. According to some of these Brahmanical authorities, a wife's primary purpose was to be auspicious for her husband. If she was responsible for the quality and length of her husband's life, then conversely she was also seen as responsible for his death. Chakravarti shows how the demise of her husband translated into the loss of any approved cultural identity for a widow and constituted, for all practical purposes, the end of her social identity. She argues that a husband's death resulted in the "social death" of his wife, and thus the beginning of her life term as inauspicious widow. Her dangerous qualities must henceforth be restrained through the imposition of severe proscriptions on her food, dress, and ritual participation.

However, despite Chakravarti's careful analysis of the *dharmic* texts, it is important to recognise that we still do not know what proportion of Hindu widows were actually treated in conformity with these supposedly authoritative codes of religious law. Chakravarti's analysis is mainly semi-otic in nature. It is neither based on empirical proof, nor is there evidence about how widespread were the practices described therein. Moreover, the

current relevance of these strictures are not that obvious.

Several of the essays illuminate the ways that the modern state, by its failure to do more than write laws and proclaim principles, without providing supports and incentives to encourage social changes in the status of widows, has failed to adequately address basic concerns. The articles delineate the range of impediments widows continue to confront in India, from sheer neglect to bureaucratic harassment and social alienation.

In her introduction, Chen provides a useful overview of the predicaments faced by widows – she broadly lists them as “limited freedom to remarry, insecure property rights, social restrictions on living arrangements, restricted employment opportunities, and lack of social support.” Patrilocality and patrilineal inheritance patterns are also responsible for the marginal status accorded to widows, as they too frequently have little leverage to negotiate and bargain for their often extremely limited rights to property, land and other types of inheritances in both their natal and marital homes.

With reference to employment, opportunities for paid work outside the place of residence are severely limited due to “lack of access to indivisible productive assets owned by the deceased husband’s family; weak bargaining power vis-a-vis male partners in economic transactions; frequent absence of a literate member in the household; limited access to institutional credit; and, particularly in the case of widows with young children, the burden of domestic work.”

Moreover, in the paid sector, one surprising finding is evidence of an inverse relationship between job availability and opportunity, and caste privilege. Permissible participation in the paid work sector is, paradoxically, most restricted for upper caste women, and “somewhat more extensive and diverse for widows be-

longing to the lower castes.” There are fewer prohibitions placed on working widows in the lower strata, not because the demands of subsistence are always more urgent (since socially elite women may belong to the same income group as socially disadvantaged females), but because the same norms guaranteeing a higher caste status for some women also can function as limits on their mobility and freedom.

This differential treatment is directly related to a widow’s valuation in terms of productive and reproductive labour. For instance, “[t]he defacing of widows is particularly marked among the upper castes, such as the Havik Brahmins of Karnataka, where women have no socially valued role other than their reproductive role. Among the lower castes, such as the Chuhra in Uttar Pradesh, where women are valued for their productive as well as reproductive role, widows are allowed to remarry and remain incorporated in the social and economic order.”

There have been a variety of arrangements made by different groups in India to deal with the panic that ensues when, in the eyes of patriarchal authority, a woman becomes a widow, and therefore becomes a potential bearer of independent status with regard to family property as well as the disposition of her sexual life. Prem Chowdhry’s article on Jat families in Punjab reflects on the practice of levirate, the widow’s remarriage to her husband’s brother. By restricting wives to partners within the same agnatic family, this custom was a means of keeping wealth and property undivided within the patrilineal fold, in addition to controlling the woman’s reproductive life and her labour contribution.

Sarkar and Banerjee succinctly capture the crux of the problem: “Whatever may be their legal rights, actual legal ownership of land by a

widow is a rarity, and even where use rights have been established, control lies elsewhere.” Bina Agarwal’s essay avers that women are usually disempowered from claiming a personal entitlement to land, but they generally have to rely on their male children and other male relatives to procure and maintain their hold on it. Misra and Thikral’s research supports the indications that in most of rural India, widows with children face the fewest obstacles in justifying their right to land use, while it is nothing short of an ordeal for childless widows to stake their claims.

It may be deduced, then, that the precarious situation most widows face would be greatly eliminated if they managed to establish independent land and property rights. Agarwal concludes that land control is the most significant factor influencing a woman’s social position in rural India and that it has the greatest potential for providing monetary security. Female control over land can take place only if customary law is overhauled and reformulated in accordance with the rules of gender equality, since “statutory laws cannot be easily enforced and customary law still prevails across most regions and social groups in India.”

It is striking that, having failed to implement a protective regime for a widow’s basic survival rights, the state has also failed to provide adequate welfare coverage for them, although a number of mostly token social security schemes have been designed towards that end. Thanks to an apathetic, corrupt, and ineffectual bureaucracy, poor women are often kept ignorant about even these limited welfare programmes which hold some potential for addressing their needs. Chen cites a plethora of reasons why social security plans fail: “lack of public awareness, narrow eligibility criteria, inadequacy of, and discrepancies in, the amount provid-

ed, unrealistic rehabilitation and training objectives, and problems in implementation." The amounts granted in the few state pension schemes might allow widows to barely support themselves, but cannot be stretched far enough to provide for additional dependents. And given the rather rigid criteria under which widows can qualify for various welfare plans, it is no surprise that many millions end up living as destitutes.

A frightening indication that this combination of handicaps often proves deadly, is the finding that widow mortality rates are 85 per cent higher compared to married women in the same age group – confirmation that "widows in India experience particularly high rates of deprivation." However, a sign of hope is offered by a number of voluntary organisations, as Prasad's, Ganguly's and the Gulatis' essays ascertain. Jhabvala further describes how the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has pioneered an insurance scheme (*Karya Suraksha*) where, for an annual payment of Rs 45 or a lifetime premium of Rs 550, female members receive financial compensation for hospitalisation, damage to homes and tools required for work, maternity expenses, and death of their spouse. Thus, widows have some recourse to insurance coverage in times of need.

Menon and Bhasin's essay on Partition widows reflects on moments when the general flow of apathy towards widows is interrupted, and they undergo a metamorphosis as signifiers of national tragedy. The reverberations of widow ideology in times of national crisis can be felt even in the present, in the aftermath of the recent Kargil war, when images of widows were exploited to extract political mileage for the party in power.

The discursive construction of widows relies on dividing their identities; normatively cast in the context of the private sphere, rather

than in the public domain, widows are conveniently transformed into icons of national suffering and grief - "war widows" and "Partition widows" - when some larger event or alibi emerges. Because of this dichotomy, Bhasin and Menon attest there is a marked difference between the State's responsibility to support widows in the event of national crisis (as evinced in the case of Partition), and other welfare schemes (noted above), which are treated more in the line of charitable handouts. Chen elucidates, "because the widows of 1947 were 'widowed by history,' it was accepted that their well-being was the responsibility of the State, and also that they needed not just temporary relief but a means of supporting themselves for the rest of their lives. The critical difference is that in the immediate aftermath of Partition the rehabilitation of widows was considered a necessary part of social reconstruction."

The fundamental flaw in the law's treatment of widows is the bias that exists towards women's protection, rather than women's independence. Widows are left marginalised as the legal system assumes a paternalistic stance. Instead of helping women to become self-sufficient, the state takes over and propagates the rhetoric appropriate to a caretaker social welfare ideology, but it does not implement programs that would provide the measures it promises.

As a text, one of its strengths is that *Widows in India* keeps insisting that the situation of widows can only be dealt with through the creation of conditions that promote the self-determination of women, and not through an emphasis on advocating their dependency on others who see them as burdens or competitors for societal resources. Widowhood has to be seen as a public interest issue, without being confined to the personal, domestic domain. Finally,

the trappings of housewife ideology that keep defining women as dependents need to be overcome.

The presentation would have been improved if the book had provided more background information on the differential status of women according to religious communities, backed up by the use of more case studies related to the same. It also would have helped to give readers a more realistic description of the current options for social reform, if the analysis had carefully mentioned the parameters of token schemes initiated by the voluntary sections, and given further data on the limited nature of the financial benefits provided to a chosen few.

The anthology urges researchers to examine widowhood as a "cause of deprivation" and asks activists to help organise widows, address their grievances, and ensure they have access to entitlements like jobs, land, education, financial and social support. However, casting widowhood as a "cause of deprivation" is also the book's main weakness, since it encourages the perspective that widows are primarily victims. If the collection had highlighted some diverse cases that complicate this paradigm – which is unfortunately the dominant framework for analyzing Third World women – the results would have been far more compelling. Escaping the model of widow-as-victim is a challenge for future research on this subject.

Nevertheless, this book is an enormously useful addition to the literature on gender and social justice issues in this country. *Widows in India* is cohesive, well-organised and informative, articulating the struggles of women to attain basic respect and basic rights, and suggests the first steps for taking innovative approaches to incorporating widows' own demands for a better quality of life, in a programme of social improvement. □