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WIDOW MARRIAGE IN INDIA DURING VEDIC PERIOD

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Hindus considered their marriage a sacrament throughout the ages and did not want its dissolution under any circumstances. Strong disapproval of the dissolution of the marriage tie has been expressed in the marriage hymn of the Rigveda. Manu has ruled against such dissolution. Our smritikaras have mostly accepted the code of Manu. Manu has, in addition, clearly spoken against Vidhava Vivaha (widow wedlock). It has been prescribed on most of the smritis that a widow should live a life of strict celibacy as an alternative to self immolation.

Manu's rules that a girl should be given in marriage once only. He holds, in addition, that a widow should never think of another man after the death of her husband. He is further more, of the opinion that a virtuous wife who constantly remains chaste after the death of her husband, reaches heaven, though she may not have any son. Manu rules that a chaste woman should under no circumstances marry for a second time. He firmly holds that the sacred shastras of the Hindus did not approve of widow marriage.

Unfortunately, scholars are divided in their opinion about the possibility of the prevalence of widow wedlock among the Vedic Indians. For example, the Learned editors of the Vedic index of Names & Subjects are of the opinion that widow marriage was in vogue in Vedic India, in the shape of the marriage of a son-less widow with that of her devara or some other nearest kinsman of the husband. They have referred to two Rigvedic passages (X.18.8 and X.40.2) in support of the above arguments. The learned authors of The Cambridge History of India hold that the devara of the widow used to marry her so as to ensure continuity of the line, in Vedic India. N.K. Dutta thinks that the Vedic Indians as a general rule permitted widows to marry their devaras and that Rigvedic passage X. 18.8 testifies to this.

Now, on careful examination of the above remarks, it is revealed that they have mostly been influenced by the view that the marriage of a childless widow with that of her husband's younger brother was in vogue within the Vedic Society.

While examining the said verses of the Rigveda² in favour of the prevalence of the widow marriage among the Vedic Indians, we come to two translations of the passage by Griffith and Sayana.

The Translation of the passage into English, according to Griffith, comes as under-

Rise! Come into the world of life, O woman! Come! he is lifeless by whose side thou lust. Wifehood with this thy husband was thy portion, who took thy hand thee as a lover.

The entire hymn X. 18 of the Rigveda as we understand is dealing with the funeral activities of the Vedic Indians.

The translation of the above verse, comes according to the interpretation of Sayana as "O woman! Come back towards the world of living. You lie down by the side of your dead husband. This your husband has produced offspring on you and he is existing in this world as your son. You, therefore, come back towards this living world."

Now, on examination of the above, we come to understand that the widow who, in all probability is the mother of an infant is, while ascending the funeral pyre of her deceased husband, being dissuaded by her relations from taking such a fatal step, reminding her of the duties she has to perform for bringing up her child. The Mahabharata and the Bhagavata Puranas furnish the example of self-immolation of a brahmana widow when her husband was killed by King Kalmaspada or Mitrasaha Saudasa. We all know that this king Saudasa was the son of king Sudasa of Vedic India. This above passage (X. 18.8) of the Rigveda is our assessment, therefore, pleads for the custom of self-immolation of widows (sati) and not for the prevalence of widow-marriage among Vedic Indians.

The English translation of the passage X. 48.2 of Rigveda, according to Griffith, which appears as follows-

Where are ye Asvins, in the evening, where at the morn? Where is your halting place, where rest ye for the night?

Who brings you homeward, as the widow bedward draws her husband's brother, as the bride attracts the groom?

Our humble opinion is that Niyoga has been hinted at in the above passage of the Rigveda, otherwise the drawal of husband's brother to bed by the widow would not have been compared with the attracting of Groom by the bride. Smritikaras like Viswarupa and Medhatithi and Dr. R.C. Majumdar have held the view that this passage refers to Niyoga. Mahabharata has cited a categorical references to niyoga where in the co-habitation of sage Vasistha with Queen Damayanti of kind Sudasa or Kalmaspada (whom we have mentioned above) resulting in the birth of Asmaka has been spoken of. The above passage as we understand points to the existence of niyoga in the Vedic society.

The above passage does not show that a devara used to marry his (childless) elder brother's wife so as to keep continuity of the line in Vedic India. In fact the Vedic texts do not support the view of the above learned scholars. We should remember one point in this connection, that is, that devara had the natural right to co-habit with his childless sister-in-law for continuity of the line. Yaska as termed devara as dwitiya varaha because he has been enjoying temporarily the right of a husband in the true sense of the term so far as niyoga was concerned. There was no justification to allow a devara to marry his elder brother's wife for keeping continuity of the line when niyoga was sanctioned in Vedic India. The above arguments of the aforesaid learned scholars, therefore, we do not consider to be acceptable.

Furthermore, the learned authors of the Vedic Index think that the verses IX, 5.27-28 of the Atharvaveda speak of the existence of widow-marriage during the age when Atharvavedic hymns were composed. They refer to the above passage (i.e. IX. 5.27-28) of the Atharvaveda wherein the re-union in the next world of a husband and his second wife has been hinted at. Before making any comment on the above remarks of the learned authors of Vedic India, we try to examine the above mentioned passage of Atharvaveda that whether they throw any light on the possibility of widow marriage.

Now, in the third line of the passage, the word punarbhav appears and it is understood that both the slokas are linked up with a punarbhav, the term which has been elaborately defined by the Hindu Smritikaras of later ages. There are seven categories of punarbhav according to the interpretation of Kasypa viz. (1) The girl who had been promised in marriage, (2) One who was intended to be given, (3) One on whose wrist the auspicious band was tied by the bridegroom, (4) Whose gift has been made with water (by her father). (5) Whose hand was held by the bridegroom, (6) Who went round the fire and (7) A girl who was born from a punarbhav of the above six kinds. Verses from the dharmashastras giving the above descriptions and divisions of a punarbhav have been quoted by Raghunandana in his Udvahatattva with the sastric injunction that no man should accept a punarbhav, belonging to any of above categories as his wife.

Kane has also discussed different categories of punarbhav. We gather from him that Smritikaras differed slightly about the interpretation of punarbhav. The above slokas of the Atharvaved do not speak for the marriage of a widow, nor does the above verse refer to any charm, as the learned authors of the Vedic Index think, to secure the re-union in the next world of a widow and her second husband.

It seems, therefore certain that there has been prescription in the above verses for sacrifices for purification of some sort of sin attached to the dame for her remaining a punarbhav. Kane is not accepting a punarbhav here in the sense of a married widow.

The translation of the above passage into English, as has been made by Whitney, is reproduced below-

Whoever having gained a former husband, then gains another later one, if they give a goat with five rice dishes they shall not be separated.

Her later husband comes to have the same world with his re-married spouse who gives a goat with five rice dishes, with the light of the sacrificial gifts.

The translation of the above passage as has been made by Kane into English comes as under: "Whatever women having first married one husband, marries another, if they (two) offer a goat with five rice dishes, they would not be separated (from each other). The second husband secures the same world with his remarried wife when he offers a goat accompanied with the five rice dishes and with the light of fees.

But as in the original passage the term punarbhav is used and as widow marriage had all along been- prohibited in the sacred scriptures of the Hindus, the above twin verses of the Atharva veda must have reference to a punarbhav only, not to widow. The penance rules in the passage was meant for removing the sin incurred by marrying a punarbhav and for nothing else. Hence, the English translation of the above passage as has been made by Whitney and Kane is not acceptable to us. Kane has, however, opined in this context that the above verses of the Atharva Veda possibly refer to the prescription of sacrifice so as to remove the sin or inferiority resulting from the marriage of a betrothed dame.

In fact the marriage of a punarbhav with the younger brother of the intended bridegroom has been authorised by Manu. Obviously, the marriage of a punarbhav was not altogether discarded in ancient India. But this type of wedding has not been whole-heartedly

supported by Smrtikaras like Kasyapa and other. Dr. Barnett also does not tender any support in favour of the existence of widow marriage during the age of the Vedas.

In conclusion, we can safely state that the Vedic texts did not sponsor widow marriage. We should not also ignore one point in this connection, that is, that child marriage among Hindus was sanctioned by the ancient Smritis. The prescriptions of the ancient scriptures for the widows to live a life of celibacy became more rigid during the late medieval period. Due to demerits of Kulinism (especially in Bengal) and as a result of peculiar socio-economic condition of India in those days, the number of child widows were steadily increasing. At the same time, their condition became more wretched. The social reformers in the early nineteenth century launched a movement to uplift the social condition of Hindu widow and enact widow marriage Act. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar championed this movement. The Hindu Widow Marriage Act was enacted on 26.07.1856. Children born of such marriages were declared legitimate. But enactment of Hindu Marriage Act of 1856 by the legislature of India (i.e. East India Co.) has not had any reaction among the Hindus till date.

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