Gender, Caste and Labour

I Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood

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This paper examines widowhood within the larger structure of relations, material and ideological. Distinctive cultural forms the basis for caste hierarchy and control of female sexuality with permanent enforced widowhood at the apex is the index of high rank. Conversely, widow re-marriage is not only an ideological rationale for low caste rank but provides a demographic basis for production relations. A single caste framework functioning both at the level of ideology and material arrangements requires distinctive patriarchal arrangements and cultural codes among the hierarchy of castes to reproduce the structure of production.

I Introduction

IN this paper I shall attempt to explore the relationships among gender, caste and labour in the context of widowhood. I will look mainly at widowhood among the upper castes, an issue that has dominated our consciousness for over a century, but try to understand the larger structure of relations, material and ideological, in which patriarchal practices enforced permanent widowhood on women. I argue that patriarchal practices among the different castes, though dissimilar, are part of a larger structure of caste, production, and reproduction. Thus traditional patriarchal practices could be very distinctive for various castes to make for a hierarchy of cultures and a system of production in which the low castes labour and reproduce labour, whereas the high castes do not labour and reproduce only specialists - ritual specialists or a literati which performs specific types of non-manual work.

Further, I suggest that the distinctive cultural codes form a basis for the hierarchy of castes in which not only are castes ranked in an elaborate hierarchy, but there is an ideological and material rationale for the hierarchy. The stringent control of female sexuality among other 'non-labouring' high castes with permanent enforced widowhood at the apex of the cultural codes becomes the index for establishing the highest rank in the caste system. Conversely, the range of marriage patterns practised in the case of widows among the lower castes, which the higher castes often impose upon them, nevertheless becomes the ideological rationale for ranking these castes as low. This serves a double purpose, since not only does it establish distinctions between castes and legitimises the hierarchy of caste, it also establishes a firm demographic basis for production relations. Thus a single caste framework functioning both at the level of ideology and material arrangements requires distinctive patriarchal arrangements and cultural codes among the hierarchy of castes to reproduce both the ideological and material arrangements of a certain structure of production.

I attempt to argue in this paper that the experience of widowhood must be firmly situated in a certain kind of production relations apart from its patriarchal context, as the discussion below will amplify.

CONCEPTUALISING WIDOWHOOD: WIDOWHOOD AS SOCIAL DEATH

Widowhood in India among the upper castes is a state of social death. The widow's social death stems from her alienation from reproduction and sexuality, following the loss of her husband and her exclusion from the functioning social unit of the family. Once a woman ceases to be a wife (especially a childless wife) she ceases to be a person - she is neither daughter nor daughter-in-law. The problem posed by brahmanical patriarchy therefore is: since the woman has no social existence outside of her husband, then as a widow who, or what, is she? The texts and the rituals attempt to work the problem out. The problem itself was simply that although the widow is socially dead, she remains an element in society: the question then was how to incorporate her. One way could have been to constitute a separate community of widows, a non-sexual community such as that of the female ascetics. Another would be to retain her in society but place her on its margins and then institutionalise her marginality. This is what brahmanical patriarchy did with the widow. The widow's institutionalised marginality, a liminal state between being physically alive and being socially dead, was the ultimate cultural outcome of the deprivation of her sexuality as well as of her personhood.

The widow's marginal state meant that she was, in a manner of speaking, functionally incorporated into the household while being considered an outsider. Thus while she was functionally incorporated either into the natal or affinal family, the widow, especially in the affinal household, was the "domestic enemy". At the same time she was the 'insider' who had fallen, one who had ceased to belong and been expelled from normal participation in the community (for failing to prevent her husband's death). She was the object of divine and social disfavour. Widowhood was perceived as a disrupter of social order and a potential violation of the moral order. There are two modes of representing the social death of widows: one is intrusive, in which the widow was conceived of as someone who did not belong because she was an 'outsider' (as in the affinal home), and in the extrusive mode, the widow who had left her natal home following marriage became an outsider because she no longer belonged. The widow was both simultaneously - in the affinal and in the natal home she became the outsider who now no longer belonged, and in this sense she shared the sense of being an outcaste. It was not, however, the rules of purity and pollution but those of inauspiciousness that were the means of maintaining social distance in the case of the widow. The widow was socially differentiated by prescribed behaviour which she had at all costs to follow.

Symbolic ideas of a cultural system are usually given social expression in ritualised patterns. The death of the husband (without whom the widow ceased to be a social entity) among upper caste Hindus was ritually expressed through special ceremonies involving the marginalisation of the erstwhile wife who, as a widow, was defined as socially dead. The rituals of widowhood incorporated certain basic features, signifying the symbolic rejection/deprivation of the widow's sexuality. The rituals included the imposition of some visible mark to define and highlight this new status. Following the assumption of the new status the widow was relocated within the household of her dead husband. Unlike the marriage rituals, marking the women's entry into legitimate sexual activity, which are elaborate, the rituals marking the renunciation of the widow's sexuality are simple but always deeply humiliating and traumatic. The most dramatic and visible 'ritual' for brahmana women was the tonsense, or the shaving of the head. The unique practice of tonsense, prevalent among many south Indian and west Indian brahmana communities, requires some analysis of the notion of widowhood in brahmanical patriarchy so that we may unfold the cultural meaning of this highly symbolic act. It may be argued that to enforce permanent widowhood upon women the community needs to continuously reiterate its authority upon the widow; the enforced tonsure is a way of doing...
that. It is a reiteration by the community of their power to control the widow's sexuality. Meyer Fortes and R. Reddih have suggested that symbols, both private and public, constitute a major instrument of power when used directly or indirectly. This is true of the tonsure, which was deeply resented by widows and perceived by them to be an indication of their utter powerlessness in the hands of a cruel system, inspired upon by brahmana men. Here the tonsure represents the social aspect of symbolic behaviour, referring to ritual processes by means of which symbolic ideas are acted out in term of real human interaction. That such actions are always highly formalised and ceremonial is evident in the removal of the hair of widows.

Widowhood is clearly a highly symbolised domain in the experience of upper caste Hindu society. While there are many elements of the widow's existence that are symbolised, there is an overwhelming concentration on the profound danger represented by the sexuality of the widow. The continued existence of the widow after the death of her husband was to convert what was most valuable to the husband in his lifetime into an awesome threat to his community. The theme that dominates the ceremonies and rituals of widowhood is the sexual death of the woman. And since the upper caste woman in brahmanical patriarchy is primarily a vehicle for reproduction, the sexual death of a woman is simultaneously a social death. The customs and rituals mark a social and ideological resolution of the tensions inherent in a conceptualisation of widowhood in which the widow continues to exist but is sexually a non-being.

II

Wifehood, Widowhood and 'Strisvabhava' in Brahmancial Patriarchy

From the evidence of the classical texts it is clear that the upper caste Hindu widow was an anomaly in traditional Hindu society, since she had no place and no function in the Hindu social order. The death of a woman's husband marked the transition from wife to widow, taking the woman from a central place in the family to its marginals. In order to understand the upper caste widow's marginal/final place, it is thus necessary to look at the wife who is the otherverse of the widow in the brahmanical texts.

WIFE IN BRAHMANCIAL PATRIARCHY

The wife is the most important focus of attention among the different categories of women in the prescriptive texts: symbols, rituals and norms are all concentrated in the person of the wife. A woman is recognised as a person when she is incorporated into her husband, only then does she become a social entity and in that state she is auspicious. A 'sumangali', a 'sahbhagyavat'. It is therefore not surprising that the wife is the very ritual prescribed for women. Together with her husband she performs rituals and procreates a son or many sons. These two acts define her as a social being, and for both the presence of the husband (who makes her complete) is imperative. Outside of the husband the wife has no recognised existence in brahmanical patriarchy.

The performance of rituals, and procreation, are acts in which women are perceived as agents or inferior partners through whom men discharge two of their three debts. The three debts are: to the sages, to the gods, and to the 'pitr'. The debt to the sages is discharged through 'brahmacharya', a compulsory stage that precedes marriage: the debt to the gods is discharged by performing 'yajnas'; and to the 'pitr' by reproducing sons. The wife thus helps her husband in discharging two of the three debts, by associating with him in the sacrifice and by procreating sons. The role that the wife is assigned in participating in the ritual itself stems from the primary function of procreating sons. Manu states the relationship quite explicitly.

To be mothers are women created and to be fathers men; religious rites therefore are ordained in the Veda to be performed (by the husband) together with the wife. While men discharged their debts and ensured their salvation, women helped men to achieve immortality and heaven through the sons they were commanded to procreate. The goal of the life of women was thus to get married and procreate sons — in fact, according to the texts women are created for the sole purpose of procreating sons. It is not surprising that the Dharmasutras permit, or rather recommend, that the husband marry again even when the first wife was living if she had no son. The sonless wife should not be an obstacle in the fulfilment of the husband's goal. That she was merely the medium through which the husband's goals were achieved and that she herself had neither personhood nor religious or social goals is evident from the denial of children (and through sons to immortality) to her in the event of her husband's death.

The rituals at the time of marriage explicitly recognise the crucial place of procreation. This is evident in the brahmanical texts, and anthropological analysis of the Hindu marriage ceremony repeat the centrality of reproduction in the rituals so evident in the brahmanical texts. For example, in the crucial 'haldi' ceremony which precedes the actual marriage rites, the spouse is smeared with turmeric. According to informant's the effect of the turmeric application is that the body is heated up for sexual intercourse. The source of sexual energy which haldi is believed to create is located unambiguously in women, in which sense they are perceived as active agents in the process of reproduction. Further, the colour most often associated with brides is red: red is the colour of vitality because of its connotation of blood. It is appropriate where something important and life-giving is about to take place. The red colour of the 'kumkuma' and 'sindura' applied only by married women symbolises the sexually active or sexually potent female. The bride's red sari and kumkuma together represent the fluids of creation, of life, female creative power, and specifically the capacity to bear children.

It is significant that the symbolism of marriage rites represent women not as a source of sexual energy, but also as having fertility closely identified with the fertility of nature and possessing qualities that are juxtaposed with other qualities supposedly held by men. However, these are held in such a way as to render them relatively 'wild' and 'disorderly'. A concomitant of the ceremony is that it is only in their relations to men as wives and mothers do they become fully cultural, or indeed fully human.

In handling the concept of wifehood the prescriptive texts too constantly attempt to resolve the basic contradiction that women represent between their nature and their function. A demoniac and innately promiscuous nature is ascribed as their lot due to the previous bad 'karma' that produces female birth; it must be suppressed in favour of their function as wives. If women are perceived as being caught in a trap caused entirely by their karma; they are the sites of conflict between 'strisvabhava', their innate demoniac nature which is lustful, and 'stridharma', their function as wives. There is no greater delight and no more destructive urge than sex for women, and even very old women are considered to be consumed by passion. Women inherit 'svabhava' from their mothers while from their fathers they inherit their stridharma, their duties as women and their ordained functions as wives. Thus a woman's biological identity is derived from the mother and her socially constructed identity is derived from the father.

The innate promiscuity of women requires the legitimate channelisation of their sexual energy in a stringently organised system of reproduction without which the social order would collapse. Thus to ensure the absorption of the wife's sexual energy frequent satiation is required, and the husband who does not approach his wife after the purificatory bath, following the end of the menstrual pollution, is to be punished. This is a rare case of punishment advocated by the Dharmasutras to an 'erring' husband. Even so, the innate sinfulness and lustfulness of women can easily lead them to adultery, which is severely punishable with every form of humiliation to be publicly heaped upon the adulterous wife. Surveillance of the wife within marriage is regarded as necessary and is repeatedly recommended in the prescriptive texts.

It was to channelise the overflowing sexual energy of women that early marriages become so crucial in the structure of brahmanical patriarchy. If a girl did not marry by the time she reached puberty she would easily and inevitably be led 'astray'. As Selwyn states, an unmarried menstruating girl eventually becomes an object of 'moral panic'. Such a woman, "untamed by wife-hood and motherhood,... a liability to her kin, her caste, and to society in general". The brahmanical textual position is unambiguous in the responsibility it places on the girl's family if she remains unmarried after puberty. The parents and the eldest brother go to hell in such a situation. If a girl is married after this point her husband
is to be socially excommunicated. According to some texts the father or guardian incurs the sin of destroying an embryo at each appearance of the menses as long as the girl remains unmarried.19

Marriage is thus imperative for women: within it alone can women's innate nature of sinfulness be channelised, and thereafter through legitimate reproduction women enable men to discharge their debts to the gods and ancestors and achieve heaven. Through wifehood and motherhood women discharge their functions in society, acquire personhood, and, in this capacity, perform rituals with their husbands as 'sahadharminis'. Within marriage as true followers of striharmma and 'patrivatadharma', women can achieve great powers. Through marriage and wifely devotion the 'biological' woman, a wild untamed and disorderly entity, can be converted into the 'cultured' woman - a social entity who has vanquished all the demoniacal force within her.20 Only thus can women overcome the inauspicious marks of female birth and acquire the necessary karma to be reborn as men, preferably 'diva' (twice born men) entitled to seek the goal of immortal heaven.21

The overflowing sexual energy of women, contained and legitimately expressed only in marriage, is regarded as assuming dangerous dimensions when the husband is away. Like the unmarried menstruating girl, a wife whose husband is absent is the object of moral panic. The didactic Sanskrit and Pali literature abounds in stories of women's licentiousness in the absence of the husband, thus bringing about moral and social disorder.22 The way the prescriptive texts deal with this situation prefigures the manner in which the sexuality of women in widowhood is handled. All the advice given to wives to make themselves attractive and to invite the sexual attention of the husband are explicitly prohibited to the wife in his absence. Her movements are severely curtailed and so too her behaviour. The contrast in the prescription to the wife while the husband is home and when he is away is telling. While the texts prescribe a purificatory bath after her menstruation, in abstinence is exhorted to make sexual advances to him that night.23

But in contrast when the husband is away the 'chaste' woman - 'sati' - is expected to forgo perfumes, garlands, collyrium, the chewing of betel and even the use of the teeth cleaning stick. According to one authority the face of the wife whose husband is away should look pale and distressed, she should not embelish her body, she should be devoted to thoughts of her husband, she should not eat a full meal and should emaciate her body.24 These traditional injunctions were repeated in the 18th century text for women which lays down that the woman whose husband is away "should abandon playing, adorning her body, attending gatherings and festivals, laughing and going to other people's houses, and even laughing with the mouth open."25 These prohibitions are the general prohibitions observed by menstruating women and by widows. All these actions are regarded as making a woman attractive26 and providing occasions for interaction with others, making the wife vulnerable to her own passions, and so must be avoided when the husband is unavailable either because he is prohibited to touch his wife, or is away, or is dead.

WIDOW IN BRAHMANICAL PATRIARCHY

As we have noted earlier the wife who becomes a widow creates an anomalous situation in the brahmanical prescriptive texts. Since the wife represents the core of womanhood she is the real focus of attention both in the prescriptive texts and in mythology. The texts concern themselves with converting biological entities into social or cultural entities. Once this ideal is achieved such women become prototypes and models for other women epitomising 'sativa', wifely power of the chaste woman. It is significant that there is no widow in traditional mythology except Kunti. But although she is important she is not central to the narrative in the Mahabharata.27 The only woman who comes close to such a position is Savitri who is doomed to widowhood in the narrative. But the focus in the story is how Savitri fights off her husband's death. By implication the narrative lays the groundwork for the widely held belief that women who are widowed fall into that state because they bring it upon themselves. To that extent they are responsible for the death of the husband.

The mythology of chaste wives who predecease their husbands is consistent with the general position in the brahmanical prescriptive texts that widowhood is solely attributed to 'purva karma' and is the punishment for a sinful existence in the past. A true pativrata can never be widowed because she will never leave her husband even in death. She will either die before him as a 'sumangali' or will accompany him in death.28 Indeed the wifely power of the pativrata lies in a woman's ability to snatch her husband away from the jaws of death as Savitri did with Satyavan; the texts tell us that just as a snake charmer forcibly draws out the snake from its hole, so too the spiritual power of the pativrata snatches away her husband from the messengers of death and reaches heaven with him. On seeing such a pativrata the messengers of death beat a hasty retreat knowing that they have been thwarted by her devotion.29 The proper ideal type of a woman in the brahmanical texts is one who is imbued with the qualities of a sati. She is a woman whose chastity makes her a living sati and gives her the power to ensure that she dies before her husband. Alternatively if her husband dies before she she has the power and will to accompany him in death as a sati and thereby reject widowhood.

This is the background to the religious sanction for sati, the immolation of the wife to overcome widowhood. All the major texts exhort the wife to accompany her husband in death by performing 'sahagamana' or 'sahamarana'. The husband is to be followed always: like the body by its shadow, like the moon by its companion, like a dim spectator cloud by lightening. In order to achieve this state the wife is prepared for such an action right from the time of the marriage vows.30 There is no doubt that the woman who gladly follows her husband from his house to the cremation ground attains, with every step, the rewards of the horse sacrifice.31 The woman who rejects widowhood can purify and rescue the most sinful and evil husband. Even if the woman has been a bad wife, who has until then, because of her wickedness and despised her husband, even she, through the act of dying with her husband, confers merit on themselves. It destroys her earlier sin even when she does this out of anger or fear. This then becomes the scriptural justification for forcing women to burn themselves. It is the ultimate and only effective 'prayaschitta' for the bad wife; though this she redeems herself and escapes the future misery which her bad karma would normally have brought her.32

Following these arguments it is clear that according to the ideology of brahmanical patriarchy, if a wife is actually widowed she has certainly not been a pativrata, nor vanquished her innate weakness and sinfulness (which her birth as a female entails), nor availed of her last chance for redemption through satihood: in short she is an outcaste. She is therefore a doubly condemnable creature: feared and despised. The widow must henceforth alone for her sins, for bringing widowhood upon herself: through bodily mortification and steadfast devotion to her departed lord she must stringently monitor her sexuality and master the promiscuity that inheres in all women. To enable others to have proof of her virtue she must occupy the darkest recesses of the house and submit herself to the constant surveillance of the patriarchal gaze, even as it might work through the women of the household, with everyone committed to upholding notions of family honour inscribed into the gender and caste codes.33

WIDOW IN PRESCRIPTIVE TEXTS

Since a woman becomes a social entity only when as a wife she is united with her husband, the death of her husband represents the cessation of her social existence and the end of her personhood. Once the husband dies their sexuality, which in marriage served familial and social goals, is of no use to the community. The death of the husband thus marks a dramatic shift in the perception of the community towards the widow. Even more than the unmarried menstruating girl or the noble wife whose husband is away, the widow of the dead husband is the object of real moral panic. While the sexuality of these other categories can be held in abeyance, the sexuality of the widow cannot; she must therefore be completely unsexed. And because this is not easy to achieve the widow must be represented as the most repugnant and despicable of characters. Feared and hated she must henceforth be confined to the 'dark spaces' where she is inaccessible.

The prescriptive texts lay down stringent codes of behaviour in order to ensure that the widow's sexuality is repressed, mastered or confined. These prescriptions are outlined in all the major texts beginning with
Manu, until which time the texts had recognized the possibility of redeploying the sexuality of the widow after a specified period of celibacy and mourning. The institution of 'niyoga' or levirate unions is mentioned in the Rig Veda and survived into the first millennium A D. However, the Dharmastra literature indicates that the rigid codes concerning sexual activity upon the absence of a son from the woman’s first husband and had to have the sanction of the elders in the family. Manu condemned the practice and upheld the norms of a celibate and perpetual widowhood. Following Manu, the emergence of the norm of celibacy became the basis for the individual prescriptions; the widow must give up all ornaments, observe fasts, cma:ate her body and remain steadfastly loyal to her dead husband. Manu lays down the following code:

Let her emaciate her body by living on pure flowers roots and fruits; but she must never even mention the name of another man after her husband has died. Until her death let her be patient of hardships, self-controlled and chaste and strive to fulfill that most excellent duty which is prescribed for wives who have only one husband.

The Veda and it more explicit about the marked nature of the widow’s appearance and behaviour, “She should give up chewing betel nut, wearing perfumes, flowers, ornaments, and dyed clothes, taking food from a vessel of bronze, taking two meals a day, applying collyrium to the eyes, she should wear only a white garment, curt her senses and anger, and sleep on the ground.”

The prescriptive texts provide only one model for the widow who continues to live after her husband, and that is the model of an ascetic widow. This model closely corresponds to two other categories of males in the brahmanical texts who, like the widow, must transcend or renounce their sexuality: the brahmacharya and the ‘sannyasi’. The first is a male who has not yet entered an active sexual phase, and the second is a male who has renounced sexual life after completing his duties as a householder and begotten sons, and is therefore free to pursue a life of spirituality. For both these categories celibacy is compulsory and underpins all the codes to be followed. Indeed the widow’s way of life is specifically called the renouncer’s life, or in the widest sense a celibate life. But there is a crucial difference because the widow cannot leave home as a true renunciate. Unlike the true ‘pravrajiya’ she has no individual salvation goals apart from those of her dead husband. The widow’s asceticism, bearing no personal results equivalent to the male ascetic, i.e. cessation from rebirth or ‘moksha’. is nevertheless necessary in order to ensure the peace of mind and happiness of her dead lord. Devotion and loyalty to one’s husband remains the key point of a widow’s life; the widow’s asceticism and celibacy is thus negative, not positive. Her ‘stridharma’ continues in widowhood and requires her to master her sexuality. It will ensure her salvation by ensuring her husband’s salvation, otherwise he will descend to hell.

For this reason the widow’s celibacy is not transient but must last as long as she lives. Thus, although there is certain similarity in the asceticism of the widow and that of the renouncer, the goals are so distinct that the widow is not an ascetic: the transformative space available to women within the ascetic tradition is denied to the widow.

In brief, the prescriptive texts clearly outline only two models of widowhood: that of the dying sati who mounts the pyre without widowhood, and proves herself to be the best follower of ‘stridharma’, and that of the living sati who becomes the ascetic within the home, remaining a celibate, steadfastly devoted to the husband till she dies. There is no third model, certainly not of the true renunciate, at least in the brahmanical prescriptive texts.

The two models of the dying sati who mounts the pyre, and of the living sati who mortifies the body, are repeated throughout the centuries in all the later texts of the brahmanical tradition. Of the two, the first remained the more valued ideal for a variety of reasons. The devotion of the dying sati who mounted the pyre, and the merits such an action brought to her relatives, were no doubt greater than those of the ascetic widow. But at the same time it must be remembered that the sati also solved the problem of the sexuality of the widow whose sexuality must not be expressed. The hazards of the sexually active widow forced into celibacy was ever present in the texts.

In the 18th century Tryambaka took an unambiguous position on the issue of the sati versus the ascetic widow. The practiced dying with the husband was commended for all women. But its, for some reason, the wife did not follow her husband then Tryambaka exhorts that her virtue must be protected for, as he puts it, if her virtue is lost the woman falls down into hell. More important, the loss of her virtue causes her husband to fall down from heaven into hell. The rewards for good behaviour are both material and spiritual. The ascetic widow gains heaven for herself and her husband. Further, she ensures rebirth as a high status man for herself. Only the chastie widow is entitled to maintenance or the enjoyment of proper burial. According to Katyayana, “A sonless widow, preserving the bed of her husband unsullied and being self-controlled should enjoy her husband’s property till her death.” (This position was upheld in judgments in the 18th and 19th centuries.)

The limited and conditional rewards, one necessary for her survival and the other to secure an unseizable future, go along with an otherwise humiliating existence. While the rules regulate minutely the widow’s conduct, it is clear from references that the lawgivers could not effectively restrain men from violating the injunctions regarding strict celibacy for widows. The Adi Parva (of the Mahabharata) recognises that “just as birds flock to a piece of flesh left on the ground, so all men try to seduce a woman whose husband is dead.” “Takcn together, the inherent sinfulwomen of women, their lustfulness, as well as the heretical character of men, required the separation, isolation and marking of the widow.

It is in the context of the above discussion that the rites and customs associated with widowhood acquire meaning. These rites and customs were prevalent in different degrees in the case of most widows, but were highly concentrated in the person of the high caste Hindu widow and included the rite of tonsure. Control over female sexuality was almost obsessively applied among high caste women because the danger to the structure of brahmanical patriarchy was great in their case. The reproduction of the hierarchical caste order with its horror of miscegeny subverting the entire edifice necessitated such stringent control. Unlike the lower caste woman, the high caste woman did not labour outside the home or participate in primary production. She was regarded solely as a receptacle through whom reproduction could take place. The death of the husband of the high caste woman and the consequent cessation of her reproductive potential created a dangerous situation. The anxiety about monitoring her sexuality doubled: while, as we have seen, the wife’s sexuality had to be channelised, the widow’s sexuality had to be abruptly terminated. The rites reflect the dramatic transition from one stage to another, from a controlled and channelised sexuality to sexual death and social obliteration.

Symbolic Structure of Widowhood

The passage of a woman from the position of a wife and sahradharmini to that of a widow was marked by various rites. These rites are not the subject of sustained attention in the early sacred texts as the focus of attention was concentrated on the male corpse. However, the texts do indicate that soon after the death of the husband, the appearance of the widow was distinctly marked off from other women as she had to give up all forms of adornment as well as those customs or symbols that were associated with the marriage of a woman. These include the ‘kumkuma’, the red mark on the forehead, the ‘sindoora’ applied in the parting of the hair in certain parts of India, and the use of ‘haldi’, among other banned items. These items as we have noted before are associated with sexuality and reproduction. Haldi, for example, has a strong relationship with fertility and prosperity and is considered so auspicious and powerful that ‘naturally’ widows could not be allowed to use it. Other customs not specifically mentioned in the texts are also widely prevalent, such as the breaking of glass bangles and the breaking of the ‘mangalstratra’, the sign of a married woman in many parts of India. These acts are performed with a degree of violence which adds to the humiliation the widow must undergo for the rest of her life and which she begins to experience immediately after the death of her husband. Two other markers of widowhood are the white, ochre, or occasionally maroon coarse garment prescribed for widows, and, among the high castes in southern and western India, the tonsured head. The colour codes of red and white are systematically sustained in the wife/widow opposition. Whereas red
symbolises fertility and sexuality, white symbolises sexuality. In the place of the red
kumkum banned for widows it is customary for them to use ‘vibhuti’ or ash instead to mark
their foreheads. The white or ochre sari symbolises purity, coolness and the sexuality of
the non-bride, more pertinent the renouncers. White is also the colour of death; the ‘vibhuti’
associated with the funeral pyre, and the exclusive use of this colour by widows among women indicates their
continued association with sexuality and death.

The ritual of the tonsure marks a more extreme resolution of the asexuality of the
widow. It is significant that there are no references to the tonsure of widows in the early
prescriptive texts. On the other hand these texts rule that the widow should not adorn her
hair with flowers and must keep it bound, so it is obvious that tonsure was not prescribed
initially, and certainly not for all cases. There is every possibility that widows of the royal
families kept it unbound during the period of pollution and mourning. Unbound hair appears
frequently as the sign of widowhood in the Mahabharata. When Draupadi kept her hair
unbound for 12 years she was symbolically proclaiming a state of widowhood and mourning.

As a custom, the tonsured head appears to have been taken over from a very early practice
among the Tamils. The Puranaru, a 2nd century AD text, portrays widows as subject to
many restraints: they did not wear ornaments, slept on beds of stone, and caked their shaved
heads with mud. The custom is mentioned in the Sanskrit texts for the first time in the
Madanaaparija, a commentary on the Skandapuran written in the 14th century.
The text states that the widow, like the son of the deceased, had to shave her hair. Up to
this point in the account the widow is depicted as sharing pollution or mourning along
with her sons. However the text further states that widows were required to tonsure themselves
continually at periodic intervals till their deaths whereas the sons are not required to
do so. The 18th century Tanjore text, the Stanharmadalam of Thyambakayajan, argues that the rules prescribing shaving the
head apply only to brahmana widows while women of other castes kept their hair. In a
18th century Maharashtra the state enforced it in the case of brahmana widows, and the custom was widespread among brahmana widows in
Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

The notion that sin and pollution both lodge in the hair appears to be widespread;
it is for example a ubiquitously held belief among Hindus and has been documented in
the case of the Hindus of Banaras. It is for this reason that funeral rituals require that
on the last day the hair is shaved off, thus ensuring the removal of the pollution. Normally, in more everyday occasions of
pollution the ritual washing of the hair is considered enough. However, death pollution
for the upper castes requires more effective formalisation, that is, the tonsure (and the shaving off of the head). In the case of widows, however, the requirement of period
ing shaving must necessarily have other connotations than with death pollution.

Anthropological evidence provides us with some clues to the relationship between hair,
pollution, and sex. Paul Hershman’s field observations of hair grooming practices in
Punjab shows that such practices are particularly important in the case of women. A similar
immaterial and ritual notion exists in India where tonsure is practised. It was enforced by
the popular belief that if the widows did not shave her head, every drop of water which fell
upon the hair polluted the husband’s soul as many times as the number of hair upon her head.
Hair is thus a major marker of the state of pollution or purity and auspiciousness and
the possible shift from one to the other, especially in the case of women.

In this context of the symbolism regarding hair, it is notable that all of the parts of
the body hair has the most mystical association. There is hardly a culture in which hair is not
for males a symbol of power, manliness, freedom. It is the seat of strength in many
myths and cultures, the most well known being the case of Samson. It is also held to have
fertilising powers as evident from Greek myths. At puberty the hair, already the seat of
strength, is considered to be enhanced and containing a double portion of vital energy, since at that point it is an outward manifestation of newly
acquired power of reproducing the species. Abundant hair is a sign of vigorous sexual
energy, idealised as the essence of feminine beauty but indicative also of wantonness in the
case of women. Since abundant hair is a symbol of life power, the way one handles it
is a marker of what one does with this life power. The grooming or exhibition of hair, for
example, has a pronounced erotic element in Melanesia. Shorn head is conversely symbolic of the loss of power, freedom and even of
castration.

While Berg has analysed the unconscious meaning of an individual’s community’s
together towards hair, Leach and Obeyesekere have, on the other hand, explored
the symbolic structure of hair and its relationship to sexuality in the context of
renunciation, asceticism and sexual restraint. Both argue that symbols have meanings at
different levels, and that apart from their personal meaning for individuals and groups they have a socio-cultural message which is
public. Leach argues that while the private has indeterminate meaning, the essence of public
symbolic behaviour is that it is a means of communication in which the actor and audience
share a common language — a symbolic language; every member of a certain culture
will attribute the same meaning to any particular item of culturally defined symbols. Leach
and Obeyesekere contest Berg on the unconscious symbolism of hair. On the basis of
anthropological evidence from south Asia they argue that hair behaviour embraces a
widely understood set of conscious sexual
symbolisations. It is because of this that hair plays such an important role of passage
involving the formal transfer of a person from
one sexual-status to another.

The tonsured head both in the case of men and widows is clearly a public symbol, one
that is recreated each time the individual makes the
symbol, is a part of a larger symbolic set in which the tonsured head, the half-shaven head of
the brahmanas, and the matted hair of the ascetic, have different but related meanings; they
are all linked up within a unit of specific cultural meanings attributed to hair and sexual
behaviour.

In the case of the widow head Obeyesekere and Leach accept Berg’s analysis of the
unconscious meaning of hair as symbolic castration. Leach argues further that allowing
the dishvelled state is an ascetic redemption of
the very existence of sex. Referring to the practice of keeping a young girl’s hair short
in Assam and Burma, whereas married women wear their hair long, he suggests that short-
haired women are those whose sexuality is under restraint. Similarly the elaborate half-
shaved half-haired head grooming of the brahmana indicates the simultaneous control
and prostitution of sexuality and the legitimate raising of
spring. In the symbolic system of brahmanism, the tuft means sexual restraint, the
matted hair means total detachment from sexual passions and the shaved head means
celibacy. At least in south Asia, then, sex behaviour and hair behaviour are consciously
associated from the start.

Obeyesekere argues strongly for a sharp distinction between the shaved head and matted
hair, which according to him are not interchangeable as their meaning is not confined
to chastity alone. It is only the shaved head that implies castration, although it at the same
time implies chastity and renunciation. The difference between the shaved head of the
buddhist monk and the matted hair of the ascetic is indicative of the gradations within restraint
in sexual behaviour. In the case of the celibacy of the monk, sexual passion must be eliminated,
not just held in abeyance, as in the Shiva
mythology, the archetype of the symbolism of matted hair. The biologically obvious
way for the complete elimination of sexual passion is castration. Coming close to that is expressing
it indirectly and symbolically through a non-
liberal interpretation as maintained by Berg, who concludes that the primarily psychogenetic
meaning of the shaved head is castration, its further cultural meaning is chastity, and its
extended interpersonal meaning is renunciation. While all three meanings are
contained within the act of tonsure for widows, the most important level of meaning is that of
castration.

The tonsure of the widow with its attendant meaning of castration, chastity and sexual death,
was at the same time a visible marker of the widow’s entry into a state of social death. For
the upper caste widow sexual death was social
death as there was no other role assigned to her apart from that of reproduction. Such
an ideology entailed the enforcement of grim conditions upon the widow’s existence.
Symbols and rituals of marriage and widowhood, along with material arrangements
affecting widows were linked together to form
a structure that governed the lives of upper
caste widows which survived into the 19th and 20th centuries. This structure had a counter but complementary set of relations which applied to lower caste widows, as the field based studies analysed below demonstrate.

III
Material Relations and Ideology of Widowhood: Two Case Studies

WIDOWHOOD IN A SOUTH INDIAN BRAHMANICAL COMMUNITY

Anthropological analysis of the belief structure of a brahmanical community with regard to gender relations provides a case study about latent ideas on widowhood among havik brahmanas in the Malnad area of south India. The study uncovers complex emotions of fear and guilt located within a structure of power in which men wield total authority over women who are completely dependent economically upon, and subordinated to, them in every way: the most vulnerable section among women are widows. The study suggests that those who wield power over others in real life invert the actual relations in their belief system and portray as malicious and dangerous the very people over whom they wield power, as in the case of havik brahmana men and havik brahmana widows. At the same time the study shows that such beliefs are unique to havik brahmana society, and are absent among those communities in which gender relations are relatively less authoritarian and women have relatively higher status within their caste than do havik women.

It is believed by havik brahmanas, among whom widows occupy the lowest status position, that these widows poison others at random with a substance obtained secretly by them from a strange reptile. Widows without male issue are particularly suspect. The victim is said to develop an incurable stomach ailment leading to a distended stomach. In young women the symptoms approximate to a pregnancy; treatment is not usually secured till it is too late. Much of havik brahmana informants hold that widows poison others to ensure that in their next incarnation they will have many sons and will predecease their husbands. The implication appears to be that brahmana widows are unhappy in this life and many perform a harmful act in order to be happier in their next one. What is significant is that the alleged victims are not selected for purposes of revenge or hatred; the widows act not against someone but for themselves to secure a different and better future than the one in which they have been widowed and subjected to infinite misery.

Havik brahmanas occupy the highest position in society in those villages where they reside and derive their livelihood from the possession of small areca-nut plantations and from land that they lease to agricultural castes. Since havik brahmanas never accept food from any other caste their poisoners have to be members of their own caste. Only widows are believed by the havik to at some time or other have been suspected of indulging in the practice. The deep seated belief may be interpreted as representing the destructive potentialities of havik brahmana widows. According to Harper the fear itself can only be explained in the context of havik social structure, especially its gender relations.

All women, but particularly widows, are feared by havik men. Women are a potent source of pollution for whom ritual defilement is a major concern. Menstruating women and women who have recently given birth to a child – in other words women in states which emphasise their ‘femaleness’ – must be segregated. Even inadvertent contact with them causes much greater ritual pollution than does contact with a member of the untouchable castes. In a state of ritual impurity women can cause untold harm to their families, and should an impure woman accidentally contaminate a god or deity it may cause illness or even death to members of her family.

At a more general level all women are inherently dangerous because they are sexually passionate and demanding; as temptresses of the flesh they sap male vitality and stand between brahman men and their salvation goals. In the context of everyday relations women are believed to disrupt fraternal solidarity, a cherished ideal among havik brahmana men, but hardly ever actualised in real life, and not because of women: this is a stereotype which, in Harper’s view, has no bearing on the break-up of the fraternal household. But it is brahmana widows who are most feared amongst women. The sight of the widow itself is inauspicious, so inauspicious that if sighted at the beginning of an auspicious venture, the venture must be postponed, even dreaming of a widow augurs ill. Further, in the system of religious beliefs all female deities are in general more dangerous and malicious than their male counterparts. Mariamma, the goddess of small pox and the deity who has the highest malevolence potential, is in local mythology represented as a brahmana widow. It is of utmost significance that ‘according to the narrative she slew her husband in a fit of rage when she was in the full of her menstrual period’ deceived by him. Mariamma thus became a widow by murdering her own husband. This is clearly linked to a deeply held belief in brahmanical society that should a husband predecease his wife it is somehow, in some mystical way, the wife’s fault. The belief in poisoning by widows is thus part of a more complex constellation of ideas around the theme of fear of women, but particularly widows. In the havik brahmana household the authority of the males over females is absolute. At marriage, performed ideally before puberty, authority over the bride is completely transferred from her natal family to her husband’s family. Post-marital residence for women is virilocal and patrilocal for men, women are excluded from inheritance and, except for certain types of jewellery, women do not own property. Divorce is prohibited, polygamy is permitted but rare, widow remarriage for havik widows is expected to remarry and often do. Since at marriage a woman is transferred from one patrilineage to another, her natal kinsmen have no jurisdiction over how she is treated. A mistreated daughter-in-law (who as a bride occupies a low status and power position within her new house, where the male kinsmen have a right to discipline her severely) should not complain to her natal kinsmen because this would only cause them grief about their own daughtering wrongs. The only recourse she has is to bring dishonour upon her husband’s family through suicide. It is not surprising then that all havik families prefer to marry their daughters to less wealthy families in order to maximise their influence over their daughters’ new social environment. Havik women labour only within the household unlike women of nearly all other castes in the region, who perform agricultural labour. Also, they do not handle financial matters. Havik males characterise women as weak willed, superstitious and constantly in need of male protection. Prohibited from possessing sacred religious knowledge they are characterised as having ‘sudra minds’. The perception about the subordination of women and girls around havik men expresses itself in a dual manner; positively with regard to comprehension and behaviour towards daughters and negatively when it constructs widows as malevolent.

Havik men hold deeply ambivalent and contradictory attitudes towards women. Mothers are revered, sisters and particularly daughters are regarded as dependents towards whom there is much affection. Harper argues that the havik male fear of women is linked to guilt about the subordinate status of females to males. This recognition of status difference accounts for the compensatory behaviour exhibited towards daughters — the expressed sentiment is that because daughters may suffer after marriage they must be made as happy as possible before the event. In the value system of the male havik there is thus a great disparity between the attitudes expressed towards wives and women in general, and towards close agnatic kinswomen.

The fear about wives in particular is evident also in the way in which every structural mechanism, ideological and organisational, is used to prevent women from uniting in opposition to the male dominance within the marital household. Women from the same patriarchal family are barred from marriage into one household; indeed brothers should not marry girls even from the same village. These conventions prevent sisters, female patrilateral parallel cousins and childhood friends from residing together in the same house after marriage. The bride’s isolation in the new house must be complete for the subordination to be effective. The life cycle of women has, however, a certain progression even within the husband’s family. After a period of trial and tribulation occupying the lowest position in her husband’s family, a woman may, and often does gain, in respect, especially when she produces a son. She may ultimately become a mistress in her own house and a mother-in-law with power over her daughters-in-law. Time thus appears to be in her favour.
But as Harper points out, if she is widowed, especially without having borne a son, even time cannot lift her out of her oppressive situation. She will be permanently deprived of even the little she had as a wife - a husband and children. Forced to wear a distinctive garment and tonsure her head to symbolise her deranged status, she is publicly defiled and despised.

More offensive than anything else, the widow is never again referred to as 'she' but instead by the neuter 'it'. Widows are ridiculed and commonly they are the butt of jokes. From then on the widow is called 'prani', animal. A symbol of inauspiciousness, she can no longer participate in the domestic ceremonies that form a part of women's culture. Everyone conceives that the life of the widow is one of unavailing misery. But this does not merit real sympathy. The fate that befalls a widow is believed to be deserved. Expected to pray daily that she should precede her husband a woman if widowed is considered to be at fault. "It ate up its husband", is what people would say. Any move up or relatively high status that she might have gained through time is instantly diminished. That havik society would regard widows to be sufficiently bitter and resentful to harm others in order to escape (in future) the sufferings entailed in widowhood is thus entirely 'rational'.

In the larger structure of relations governing caste, gender, widowhood, and belief systems, there is a crucial but inverse connection between the real position of the widow's powerlessness and their imagined power to strike back. The subordinated status of the woman as widow is expected to breed the desire for revenge. The overt submission of widowed women is perceived as a mask which hides their suppressed anger and makes them infinitely dangerous, in some cases even blood-thirsty.

It is notable that the structure of ideas with regard to widowhood among brahmanas grows out of the material and social position of widows in high caste society. In marked contrast, widowhood is not pitiable, nor are widows regarded as dangerous among different categories of women in the lower castes. Widowhood is not marked by the kind of dramatic break in the life of a woman as in high caste society; it is a different state but the structural opposition between the wife and the widow does not exist in non-brahmanical society. Widowhood is organizable in the case of the non-brahmana castes, along the axis of production and reproduction rather than reproduction alone. Widows from these castes are thus incorporated in the social and economic order. This is strikingly brought out if we look at the labouring castes who work for the havik brahmanas in the Malnad region. Post-marital residence in the case of the labouring castes is determined by individual economic factors and sometimes may even be in villages where neither the man nor the wife has close ties but where work is available. Extended families are not glorified among sudras as among the haviks. Among untouchables the extended family is almost never found. Post-puberty marriages are the norm and divorce may be initiated by either party. Family authority is more equally divided between the husband and the woman: women earn and handle family finance. Menstrual taboos are less rigorous, and payment of a bridewealth frequent.

Sudras and untouchable widows do not shave their heads, nor are they set apart by distinctive dress nor referred to as animals, nor excluded from auspicious ceremonies. In these castes widows and divorcees may and do contract second marriages. The status of a woman who enters into a secondary marriage is only slightly less than that of a virgin bride. It is significant that non-brahmana widows in the Malnad region are absorbed into productive and reproductive activities (if they are in such an age group); women's status is relatively higher in their own caste than is the case with havik women, and unlike the latter they are not considered dangerous or inauspicious.

**WIDOWHOOD AMONG LOW CASTE LABOURING GROUPS IN NORTH INDA**

The manner in which material and social factors differentially organise conceptions of widowhood is examined and analysed at length by Pauline Kolenda in the context of a north Indian village. Kolenda's essay is comparative with regard to region and explores the connection between present practice and historical texts which make references to widowhood, the levirate and remarriage of women.

Kolenda examines widowhood among high caste rajputs an low caste chauhas in a north Indian village. Drawing from other anthropological works especially on south India, she notices that widowhood as well as the status of women in the high castes is related among other things to control over property inherited by men, which may foster the degradation of women in order to exclude them from a share in inheritance. Ideologically this is portrayed as women being 'assimilated' to their husbands and becoming one flesh with them. In contrast, the lower caste women are not 'assimilated' into marriage but 'in-marriage remain equal and opposite to them. An important factor responsible for the differences between high and low castes is the contrast between high castes as landowners and the low castes as wage earners. There is here an equality between adult sons and father, and between husband and wife, which comes from their separate and more or less equal status as wage earners. The lower caste woman's economic role accounts for her more equal rights both in her marital and natal homes. Thus the difference between high caste and low caste women is caused by differences in relation to production.

Kolenda carries forward the analysis of gender, caste and the economy with a close look at widowhood but particularly relating to enforced widow mating among low castes. To begin with, chauhas do not necessarily follow patriarchal residence. In their case there is much flux in the population as families change residence: chauha families may settle in the wife's village or other villages where one might find kin, or just a place where work is available. Lack of land has resulted in the chauhas being more mobile, less anchored to locality than the high caste rajputs in the area. Because of their poverty chauha women work outside the home: it is they who do the 'jajmani' work. A chauha widow could support herself and her children as long as she could continue the jajmani work. There was no dramatic change in the chauha widow's lifestyle or standard of living.89

The rajput widow on the other hand was stripped of jewels and remained in her dead husband's property contingent only upon her good behaviour, and was forbidden to marry again. Only one sexual partner was envisaged for a rajput woman during her lifetime and that was her husband. To him she was given in sacred ceremony, with community sanction and a dowry. A woman along with her family was made impure by any subsequent sexual relationships she might have. An adulterous rajput wife or widow could be cast out and even executed. Sati was an ideal, and worshipping at a sati shrine was the first ceremony in every marriage of a rajput woman.90

In main contrast between rajput women and chauha women is with regard to work, marriage, and widow mating. All chauha women, along with other sudra or untouchable castes, could remarry, and the practice of levirate was common among these castes. In the structure of ideas widow remarriage is one of the key defining practices that constitute the impurity of low castes. But, significantly, as has been documented elsewhere, low castes were expected to conform to the custom.91 The insistence of such a practice was in part a reinforcement of closely guarded upper caste privileges including enforced widowhood which ensured higher ritual status for them. But it was also a means by which the upper castes manipulated and controlled the demographic structure of all castes - high and low. Patriarchal formulations were closely tied to caste and class formation.

That caste, class, and patriarchy worked together to organise the sexuality of all women is evident from widow mating practices among the chauhas. Chhuri widows of child-bearing age were expected to remarry. Only widows with grown children, i.e., one who was well past child-bearing age, was permitted to remain unmarried if she made a declaration to the community to be a celibate.92 This was not a recognition of the sexual needs of widows but an arrangement to utilise the productive and reproductive labour of widows. While maintaining land structures intact as among agricultural castes such as the jats (who were restricted to levirate widow marriage), such an arrangement would ensure the full productive potential of a woman to ensure maximal repulsing of the labouring and servicing castes.

Key elements in chhuri widow mating were a hierarchy of mating patterns according to the distance of the second mate to the dead husband, and a set of rules for the disposal of the widow's sexuality. The power to dispose of a widow's
sexuality lay with the patrilateral contingent of her husband's paternal family. The preferred mate to whom the widow will be assigned is the dead husband's unmarried younger brother. If there is no unmarried younger brother she may be assigned to a married brother with his wife's, the widow's, and the widow's father's consent. She may be also given to a son of a sanctioned matriarchal cross-cousin of the dead husband, but here too her consent as well as that of her father is required. In the case of the latter the new mate must pay for her. Both the patrilateral parallel cousin and matrilateral cross-cousin have the right to sell her once she has matured with them. A married woman who has become adulterous can also be sold. Once a woman is sold she may be re-sold repeatedly. 61

The hierarchy of marriage types are
(1) marriage by 'pheras' (the first marriage);
(2) secondary marriage to husband's brother;
(3) secondary marriage to husband's patrilateral parallel cousin; (4) being sold to a man who is a matrilateral cross-cousin of the husband; and (5) being sold to a stranger. 62

It is evident from the above summary that despite the relative economic independence and security of the churi women, it did not make them 'close to equals’ 63 as Kothari establishes so decisively: the men could pressure her to take another mate and they could even sell her so that she was separated from her kin. Her inferiority was established through the mating rules but more so in the rules regarding the buying and selling of widows. Control over the sexuality and the labour of the widow lay not with the widow but in the hands of the husband’s family. 

The analysis of churi widow mating customs also considers the relationship of such practices to textual evidence, and she suggests that the customs among low castes are not an aberration accountable to 'unsanctioned' patterns, but rather are an archaic survival of prevalent mating patterns before the Brahmanical codes proceeded to lay down definite and distinctive sexual codes for different categories of women. 64 While they prescribed ascetic widowhood, decommunion and the sexual death of the upper caste widow and thereby raised the status of the entire caste in relation to others, they characterised widow matings: conceptualised in the practice of nityog (the traditional term of levirate) as fit only for 'cattle' and sudras. 65 It then became a crucial index of caste status in a deeply hierarchical order. The reproductive practices of the labouring classes were simultaneously castigated and utilised; multiplying cattle and those who must labour was consistent with the Brahmanical caste order. Patriarchal formalism for women of the high castes and women of the low castes were structurally integrated into the ideology and material relations of the caste system. The high castes were required to restrict reproduction so that pressure on resources in their control were not strained. Equally, since they did not labour, the patrilateral parallel cousin or a labouring class would expand the potential to exploit resources under the control of the upper castes.

Churi widows like all low caste widows were socially subordinated but did not face sexual death (or social death) at the death of their first husbands; the churi widow was the structural opposite of the brahmana or rajput widow who faced sexual and social death when her husband died. While enforced widowhood was the rule among the high castes, enforced cohabitation may be to be the rule for widows of the lowest castes.

The apparent difference in widow marriage and widow mating patterns between high castes and low castes may lead to the conclusion that there were different patriarchies according to the respective caste status. This is only partly true because it needs to be stressed that these differences were arranged within a larger single conceptual and material organisational structure. Within the larger rubric of a Brahmanical patriarchy, caste, gender, land control and demography were tied inexorably together both conceptually and in terms of material and social arrangements.

Notes

1 This paper was first presented at a conference on 'Widows in India' held in March 1994 at the institute of management, Bangalore. It will form part of a volume on widows in India, ed. by Marty Chen and Jean Droze. I am grateful to Patricia Uferos for comments on an earlier draft of this paper as well as for drawing my attention to certain anthropological writings on the symbolism associated with hair. I am also indebted to Gerta Lerner for extended discussions on gender which have helped to shape some of the arguments in this paper.

2 I have made a free and associational use of this term borrowing from Orlando Patterson's classic work on slavery. Although the upper class widow was far removed from the slave – someone who was uprooted from family and also from culture – I find the concept of social death useful in capturing the peculiar status of the widow: that of a non-being. The social death of the widow made her permanently into a non-being, an indelibly defective wife which was consequently without any identity, someone who could never be brought to life again. Orlando Patterson, Slavery, and Social Death: A Comparative Study, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1982, p 38

3 Cited in Patterson, Slavery, p 37.


6 Ibid., p 560.


8 Nanada, Srimudasa, V, 19 cited in Kane, HDS, p 561. As early as the Satapatya Brahmana it is said that 'the woman is possession with Nri-rti, ill-luck or destruction.

9 Translated by George, Buhler, Sacred Laws of the Aryas, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1975 (reprint).

10 According to the marriage rules of the Arulvazhavan Grhyasutras (173-18) the husband leads the wife thrice round the fire and the water jar (a symbol of fertility) keeping their right sides turn towards it and murmurs: 'I am heaven thou art the earth, I am 'saman' thou art the 'rk', let us both marry here. Let us beget offspring' (Kane, HDS, pp 528-30).

11 Later when the bride enters her husband's house the husband chants "here may happiness increase you through to offspring". Then he kindles the nuptial fire and as his wife is seated on a bull's hide he makes oblations chanting "may prapatis create offspring to us". As the bride enters her husband's house she breaks her silence and says "may my husband live and may I secure offspring"; Kane, HDS op cit, p 530.

12 The rites that relate to the ‘garbhanam’ or the 'chaturthikaram' ceremony performed before the marriage is consummated follow the first menstruation of the girl. After the wife has bathed, her husband makes her pour rice which is then boiled and eaten. Then the husband fills a water jar and sprinkles the wife thrice with the water and repeats certain mantras: 

13 May Visnu ready your parts: may Trvata frame your beauty, may Prapatis sprinkle and may Dhana plant an embryo unto you. May the Asvins plant in thee an embryo. As the earth has fire inside it, as heaven has Indra inside it, so I plant a garbha in the thee

14 The rites according the ‘garbhanam’ or the ‘chaturthikaram’, three nights after marriage the husband performs certain acts and murmurs, “into thy breath I put the sperm, may the male embryo enter the womb as an arrow into the quiver, may a man be born here, a son after ten months”; Kane, HDS pp 202-03.

15 Tom Selwyn, Images of Recreation: An Analysis of a Hindu Marriage Ceremony, Man, Volume 14, No 4, December 1979, p 684.


17 Selwyn, op cit, p 687.

18 Julia Leslie, The Perfect Wife: The Orthodox Hindu Woman According to the Stridhamapaddhati of Trusmbhakujavan, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989, pp 248, 266.

19 Ibid., p 268.

20 Apatuma Dharmasthala, 1 I 28 19.


22 Selwyn, op cit, p 688.

23 According to Parasara an unmarried girl beyond the age of 10 is described as a ‘rajasvala’ (a menstruating woman). If the father has not given a girl in marriage by the time she is 12 his ‘pits’ have to drink her monthly discharge (Kane, HDS, op cit, p 444).

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19 Kane, HDS, op cit, p 442.
20 In one of the rituals at the time of marriage the husband says to the wife. “Be firm like a stone. overcome the enemies. trample down the foes” (Kane. HDS op cit, p 528).
21 Leslie, op cit, pp 266-72.
22 Chakravarti, ‘Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy’, op cit, p 582.
23 The Agni Parana says, “anointed with unguents of ground turmeric and saffron, wearing bright garments, thinking only of her husband, beautifully ornamented, she goes to bed” (Kane, HDS, op cit, p 565).
24 Kane, HDS, op cit, p 566.
25 Leslie, op cit, p 291.
26 Ibid. p 97.
27 Kunti was the senior wife of King Pandu and mother of the Pandavas. Kunti’s widowed status is not important in the Mahabharata. The significant aspects of Kunti’s life are - first, her power to conceive through invoking the gods; second, the conception of Karna before her marriage to Pandu and the consequent abandonment of Karna which causes her much anguish particularly when the great war takes place, since Karna is the son of the Kauravas and against her other sons; and third, Kunti’s important role as mother of the Pandavas. For an insightful interpretation of Kunti see Irawati Karve, Yauganta: The End of an Epoch, Sangam Books, Delhi, 1974, pp 37-55.
28 A ‘parvata’ or, for instance, is defined by Brihaspati as one who is emancipated when her husband is away on a journey and who dies on the death of her husband; Leslie, op cit, pp 293-94.
29 Leslie, op cit, pp 293-94.
30 According to Tryambaka’s Stridharapuddhati the brahmanas priests should recite the words, “may you be the one who accompanies your husband always, when he is alive and even when he is dead”. According to the same text, there are great rewards in store for the pious: “if when her husband has died a woman ascends with him into the fire she is glorified in heaven, as one whose conduct is equal to that of Arundhati”; Leslie, op cit, pp 293-94.
31 Leslie, op cit, p 292.
32 Ibid, p 295.
33 Uma Chakravarti, ‘Social Pariahs and Dudes: Widowhood Among Nineteenth Century Pouna Brahmanas’ Social Scientist, Nos 244-46, September-November 1993, pp 130-58.
34 Kane, HDS, op cit, p 599.
35 Manu N 157-60.
37 Fuller and Logan, op cit, p 89 ff.
38 Leslie, op cit, p 299.
39 A widow who forsakes sons, brothers, and other male relatives after her husband’s death and lives independently incurs great condemnation according to Tryambaka; Leslie, op cit, p 300.
40 Ibid, p 299.
42 That the widow has no an acetic is evident from the observations of Parvatabai Athavale, a widow writing about widowhood in 1928. Describing the forced tonsure of widows Parvatabai distinguished between the voluntary acceptance of the renunciation status and the coerced celibate status of the widow as embodied in her tonsure. The voluntary shaving of the head as an initiatory rite, for those who ‘give up’ the worldly life, was regarded by Parvatabai to be a “rightful religious act” but not the compulsory shaving of the head of the widow against her volition. Volition there fore was the crucial difference between a true renunciation existenee and a simulated renunciation existence of the widow based on coercion exerted by others. In her view the renunciation within the home was a contradiction in terms. Parvatabai Athavale, Hindu Widow, Reliance, Delhi: 1986 (reprint), pp 48-49.
43 As early as the 2nd century AD, Tamil poems portray the astuteens required to keep the dangerous power possessed by women under control. One poem describes the hazards of a young, chaste high-born woman attempting such control: unable to do so she wanders towards the burning ground and is consumed by the fire from the passions of her youth and able to protect her chastity → George Hart, ‘Woman and the Sacred in Ancient Tamilnadu’, Journal of Asian Studies, Vol XXXII, No 2, February 1973, pp 233-50, p 242
44 Leslie, op cit, p 298.
45 Kane, HDS, op cit, p 586.
46 Honama vs Timannabhak, Indian Law Reports (ILR), 1 Bombay 559; Bihikhwar vs Harshibai, ILR 49, Bombay 459.
47 Kane, op cit, p 584-85.
48 Beck, op cit, p 559.
49 The breaking of glass bangles and the ‘mangalsutra’ are now the most common form of representing the transition from the wife as subhagan or samangali, to that of the widow on the visual medium. In the Indian cinema it is the transformative symbol for widowhood followed by the donning of a stark white sari.
50 Fuller and Logan, op cit, pp 89-92.
51 Beck, op cit, p 571, n 13.
53 Hart, op cit, p 241.
54 Kane, HDS, op cit, p 587.
56 Kane, HDS, op cit p 587.
57 Leslie, op cit, p 303.
58 Uma Chakravarti, Gender Class and Nation: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai, Kali: For Women, Delhi, (forthcoming).
59 Fuller and Logan, op cit, p 94.
60 Ibid, p 95.
61 According to Hershman there are certain times when pollution occurs for women: at the death of the husband, during menstruation, and following intercourse. The end of the pollution period is marked by a ritual bath when it is crucial that the hair is washed, groomed and bound in the proper fashion → (Man) (New Series), Vol 9, No 2, June 1974, pp 274-98, 285-89.
62 Personal communication from my maternal grandmother, C Alamelu.
63 Berg, op cit, pp 29-30.
64 Ibid, p 22.

67 Leach, op cit, p 148.
68 Ibid, and Obeyesekere, op cit, pp 45-50.
69 Leach, op cit, p 154.
70 Ibid, p 156.
71 Obeyesekere, op cit, pp 33-34, 45-50. In an influential 19th century novel in Marathi, the young widow’s resistance to the range of practices associated with widowhood is faithfully broken by her forcible tonsure, executed brutally by her cruel and orthodox uncle. At the end of the tonsure the uncle says, “You want to remarry? Go and remarry now. This is how one has to cut off the noses of the like of you”. Hari Narayan Apte, Pan Laktshyanti Kon Ghetko, translated by Srinivas Kocher into Hindi as Kaun Dhyan Deta Hai, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1961, p 484.
73 Ibid, pp 81-83.
74 Ibid, pp 87-88.
75 Ibid, p 85.
76 Ibid, pp 89-90.
77 Ibid, p 86.
78 Ibid, pp 87-88. The material condition of women as permanent dependents of men is a crucial component of women’s vulnerability. This is compounded when a woman is widowed because she is then regarded as losing even her limited entitlement to food and clothing to which she had access as a wife. She also loses the power she may have wielded as manager of the domestic domain. Cultural values legitimise a low allotment of food as widows are expected to fast often and eat minimally. In return for the ‘maintenance’ they receive from their male official kinsmen (or even natal kinsmen) they must render labour which is invisibilised. Widows are often taunted with the allegation that they are ‘dudges’, eating up the resources of a household. For an extended discussion of the material dimensions of widowhood, see Uma Chakravarti, ‘Social Pariahs’, op cit.
80 Harper, op cit, p 88.
81 Ibid, p 89.
83 Harper, op cit, p 90.
84 Ibid, p 91.
85 Ibid, pp 91-92.
87 Ibid, pp 299-300.
91 Chakravarti, Gender Class and Nation, op cit.