

EXPLORING WIDOW REMARRIAGE: A STUDY OF VEDIC INDIA

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Abstract

The study revisits the contentious issue of widow remarriage in Vedic India through an in-depth analysis of various passages from Vedic texts and different interpretations posited by scholars. The findings suggest that, while it has been historically viewed marriage as an indissoluble sacrament in Hinduism, evidence regarding widow remarriage is not conclusive. Some scholars argue that widow remarriage, specifically to a deceased husband's brother, was practiced during the Vedic era. This assertion is supported by Rigvedic passages X.18.8 and X.40.2, which purportedly hint at the practice. However, this interpretation is disputed, with some arguing that these passages actually underscore practices of self-sacrifice or 'niyoga' (levirate marriage). The study further explores Atharvavedic verses suggesting the remarriage of a punarbhu or a betrothed woman, not a widow. The research therefore suggests that Vedic texts did not explicitly endorse widow remarriage. It argues for a nuanced understanding of ancient customs and societal norms, highlighting the need for more rigorous and context-sensitive interpretations of Vedic texts.

Keywords: *Vedic India, widow marriage, Manu's teachings, Niyoga practice, Punarbhu concept*

INTRODUCTION

The historical examination of a widow's position constitutes a substantial area of interest for researchers, particularly concerning their life choices post the demise of their husbands. In the period leading up to 300 B.C.E, widows were not necessitated to commit 'Sati', or self-immolation, on their husbands' funeral pyres. Their lives post-widowhood were guided by three primary options. They could choose a life of celibacy and solitude, partake in 'Niyoga' (levirate), or seek a new beginning through remarriage. The custom of levirate was a prevalent practice in various ancient civilizations, notably Sparata and Jewish communities. In Jewish tradition, a widow could become her brother-in-law's wife without any formal ceremony. The Rigveda permitted a similar practice known as 'Niyoga', which allowed a childless widow to cohabit with her younger brother-in-law until the birth of a male heir.¹ However, this practice served a distinct purpose and should not be misconstrued as a form of remarriage.

The objective of 'Niyoga' was the continuation of the male lineage and not necessarily the welfare of women.² Thus, while it did involve intimate relations, it wasn't deemed as adultery but a duty performed for 'dharma' or righteousness. The man involved in Niyoga performed this as a religious obligation rather than a fulfillment of personal desires. This unique practice was also highlighted in the epic Mahabharata, where instances of Niyoga were recorded for the preservation of lineage. A salient example from the Mahabharata includes Queen Satyawati compelling her son Vyas to perform Niyoga with her son Vichitravirya's widows, Ambika and Ambalika. This resulted in the birth of Dhritarashtra, Pandu, and Vidur. Interestingly, the epic also mentions Niyoga between women and divine entities. After being cursed with a fatal fate if he engages in intimate relations, Pandu's wives, Kunti and Madri, performed Niyoga with the Gods and bore the five Pandava brothers.

The Manusmriti, a key Hindu scripture, discusses Niyoga in chapters IX 59-63 but later forbids it in chapters IX 64-68. It clarifies that the child born out of Niyoga is considered the legitimate child (Kshetraja Putra) of the husband and wife.³ This practice of Niyoga was not confined to cases where the husband was deceased but also if he was impotent, afflicted with disease, or missing. In some cases, the husband himself, or his relatives, would appoint someone to impregnate his wife. The Kshetraja son was considered next in line to biological sons concerning legitimacy. The prevalence of Niyoga likely continued until 300 B.C.E, with early Dharma Shastras permitting up to two sons through Niyoga, later restricted to one.

The notable sage Narad (100 - 300 C.E.), mentioned Niyoga as a fulfillment of duty rather than lust. Yet, societal resistance grew against legitimizing Kshetraja sons, leading to the disappearance of this practice by 600

C.E.⁴ In the Rigvedic era, there was no mention of Sati for widows. While the widow performed a ritual lying next to her husband's pyre, she would descend at the call of her brother-in-law. However, the later Vedic period witnessed a decline in widows' conditions, reflecting the societal preference for a woman to remain non-widowed.⁵

As society transitioned into the post-Mauryan age (200 B.C.E – 300 C.E.), widows' lives became significantly constrained by the normative treatises of the era. Expected to live austere lives with self-imposed restrictions, widows often faced societal pressures to preserve their chastity and suppress their desires. Although Narad supported the concept of one marriage, he made an exception for widow remarriage under certain circumstances. Yet, these remarriages were viewed negatively.⁶ Manu, the ancient lawgiver, strongly discouraged widow remarriage. Despite this, the concept of 'Punarbhū', or a remarried widow, was not entirely unknown.⁷ Still, the Brahmanical society never granted honour or dignity to a remarried widow. Hints in the Rigveda and Atharvaveda suggest that widow remarriage was considered under certain circumstances. These ancient texts indicate that after a period of mourning and waiting, a widow may choose a partner who desired her. In the epic tales, there are also examples of remarriage, such as Sugriva and Vibhishana marrying their elder brothers' widows.⁸ Nevertheless, these practices were exceptions and not the norm during this era.

Objectives

The study aims to critically analyse the prevalence and perception of widow remarriage in Vedic India, focusing on the influence of 'Niyoga' and the societal implications of 'punarbhū' as depicted in Rigveda and Atharvaveda. The study will also scrutinise the potential endorsement of a widow's remarriage to her deceased husband's younger brother and assess the claims of scholars concerning the acceptance of widow remarriage in this era.

Methodology

The research incorporates an analytical and historical methodology. It undertook a rigorous examination of ancient Vedic scriptures and hymns, along with their various interpretations by numerous scholars. Emphasising the socio-cultural contexts, the study critically evaluates opposing viewpoints on widow marriage in Vedic India. A detailed exegesis of specific Rigvedic and Atharvavedic passages were conducted, allowing us to unravel complex societal norms and customs relating to widowhood and remarriage during that era.

Women can be identified as an invaluable asset to society. A retrospective look at the ancient epoch in India reveals a time when women's contributions were substantial and significant. During the Rig Vedic era, Indian women were accorded a prestigious standing within their society, indicative of an era where their overall societal conditions were favorable. They were granted the latitude to achieve considerable intellectual and spiritual advancement. Indeed, the period was characterized by the prominence of numerous female Rishis.

While monogamy predominantly held sway, it was not uncommon for the more affluent segments of society to partake in polygamous arrangements. Noteworthy is the absence of societal systems such as sati or early marriage during this period. Regrettably, the latter part of the Vedic period marked the onset of discriminatory practices against women, particularly with regard to educational opportunities and other fundamental rights.

This era witnessed the introduction of detrimental social practices such as child marriage, the purdah, widow burning, and polygamy, thereby exacerbating the plight of women. Even revered texts like the epics and Puranas started to equate women with property, further diminishing their societal value. The impact of Buddhism, in this context, appears to have been negligible in ameliorating the situation for women.

While the Maurya kings frequently enlisted female bodyguards, spies, and 'Striadyaksha mahamatras,' the status of women remained significantly impaired. Upper-caste women were compelled to adhere to the purdah, and the practice of widow burning became an established societal norm during this era. Men were predominantly polygamous.

Kautilya's Arthashastra imposed additional stigmatization on women. It categorically dismissed the concept of women's liberation, asserting that women were not permitted to venture beyond their homes without their husbands' consent. Women's conditions further deteriorated during the Gupta period. The Smritishastras heaped scorn upon women, while Manu's dictum declared a woman to be dependent upon her father during her childhood, her husband during her youth, and her son during her old age. In addition to the widespread practice of child marriage and sati, societal ills such as prostitution and the Devadasi system gained prominence during this period.

Some scholars of the opinion that widow remarriage was practiced without any hindrance in ancient India, during the Vedic period.⁹ The Rig Veda even prescribes that the widow should give up thinking of her late husband and should accept the marriage proposal of the person who wants to marry her. The Narada Purana also classified the three kinds of widow remarriage that existed. However, later on, in the 10th to 11th century CE, widow

remarriage was not encouraged and was universally prohibited¹. The system of Sati became prevalent and widows were expected to live a life of austerity and penance. The socio-cultural factors that influenced this change are complex and varied, but some of them are:

The role of class: The upper classes, especially the Brahmins, were more rigid and orthodox in their adherence to the Dharmashastras, which prescribed strict rules for widows. They also wanted to preserve their family honour and property, which could be jeopardised by widow remarriage.

The role of caste: The caste system divided the society into hierarchical groups, each with its own norms and customs. The lower castes, were more flexible and tolerant of widow remarriage, as they had less social prestige and economic power to lose.

The role of economic status: The economic status of widows was often dependent on their husbands and their families. If they remarried, they would lose their rights and inheritance from their former husbands. They would also face social stigma and ostracism from their community. Therefore, many widows preferred to remain unmarried and depend on charity or work as domestic servants.

These factors created a hostile environment for widow remarriage in medieval India. It was only in the 19th century that some social reformers, such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, campaigned for the legalisation and promotion of widow remarriage. They faced fierce opposition from the conservative sections of society, but they managed to persuade the British government to pass the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856.¹⁰ This act allowed Hindu widows to remarry legally and gave them some rights and protection. However, it also required them to forfeit their inheritance from their former husbands and face social discrimination from their families and communities. Therefore, the act did not have a significant impact on the practice of widow remarriage in India.

The question of widow marriage in Vedic India is one that has long been the subject of scholarly debate, yet no conclusive consensus has emerged concerning its prevalence during the incipient phase of Aryan civilization. It is, thus, necessary to revisit the issue, scrutinizing various passages from the Vedic texts and the diverse interpretations posited by multiple scholars. Given a thorough review of our ancient scriptures, the inference drawn is that the Hindus have, throughout history, regarded marriage as a sacrament. This sacrosanct view of marital unions implied a resistance to their dissolution under any circumstances. Such steadfast opposition to the termination of marriage is evident in the hymn dedicated to marriage in the Rgveda.¹¹ The lawgiver Manu provides additional support to this notion by proscribing the dissolution of marital bonds.¹² This mandate of Manu is predominantly echoed in our smritikamas, which serve as revered repositories of Hindu law and customs.¹³

In line with this philosophy, Manu has unequivocally expressed his disapproval of Vidhava Vivaha, or widow remarriage. This concept, as delineated in most smritis, posits that widows should embrace strict celibacy, or in extreme cases, self-immolation, as alternatives to remarrying. Manu's stipulation that a girl should only be given in marriage once,¹⁴ coupled with his emphasis on the importance of widow chastity after her husband's demise, serves to fortify this standpoint.¹⁵ He even posits that a virtuous wife, maintaining her chastity post her husband's death,¹⁶ is assured of a place in heaven, regardless of whether she bore him any sons.¹⁷ In essence, Manu's teachings, and by extension, the sacred sastras of the Hindus, did not endorse widow remarriage.¹⁸

However, the scholarly discourse on the perpetuity of widow marriage among Vedic Indians is far from unanimous. For instance, the erudite authors of the Vedic Index of Names & Subjects¹⁹ argue that widow remarriage was practiced during the Vedic era, specifically through the custom of a son-less widow marrying her 'devar' (husband's younger brother) or another close kinsman of her deceased husband. They cite two Rigvedic passages (X. 18.8 and X. 40.2) in substantiation of their claim. Corroborating this perspective, the learned authors of The Cambridge History of India²⁰ also posit that the widow's 'devara' would wed her to ensure the lineage's continuity. N.K Dutta further supports this argument, suggesting that the Vedic Indians, in general, permitted widows to marry their 'devaras,' as suggested by Rigvedic passage X. 18.8.²¹

Upon rigorous scrutiny of these statements, it becomes apparent that they primarily hinge on the premise that the Vedic society practiced the remarriage of childless widows to their deceased husbands' younger brothers. To further probe this issue, it is imperative to analyse whether Rigvedic verses (X.18.8 and X.40.2) indeed endorse the prevalence of widow marriage among Vedic Indians.

Consider, for instance, the passage X.18.8 of the Rigveda, which reads:

"Udirsva naryabhi jivalokam gatasu metamupasesa ehi Hastagrabhasya didhisastavedom patyurjanitvamabhi samvabhutha."

An English translation of this verse, as offered by Griffith²², reads:

"Rise! Come unto the world of life, O woman! Come! Here is lifeless by whose side thou liest. Wifehood with this thy husband was thy portion, who took thy hand and wooed thee as a lover." This study aims to dissect such verses and their interpretations to shed light on the contentious issue of widow marriage in Vedic India.²³

Hymn X.18 of the Rigveda, as per our comprehensive understanding, furnishes a vivid portrayal of the funeral rites followed by the Vedic Indians. An exploration of this hymn and its subsequent interpretations offer valuable insights into the customs pertaining to widowhood, and the societal norms governing the same.

Consider the following verse from the said hymn:

"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."

This interpretation, as provided by Sayana, offers a profound insight into the societal practices and expectations pertaining to widowhood. A careful examination of this verse suggests that the widow, likely a mother of an infant, is being persuaded by her relations to ascend the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. Her relations, understanding the gravity of the situation, implore her to reconsider such a drastic step by reminding her of her duties towards her child. The notion of self-sacrifice, as exemplified through self-immolation, is further evidenced in the Mahabharata and the Bhagavata Purana.²⁴ These revered texts provide examples of a Brahmin widow's self-immolation following her husband's death at the hands of King Kalmaspada or Mitrasaha Saudasa. Interestingly, King Saudasa was the son of King Sudasa, a prominent figure in Vedic India. Consequently, our interpretation of the aforementioned passage (X. 18.8) from the Rigveda leans towards endorsing the practice of sati (self-immolation of widows) rather than arguing for the prevalence of widow remarriage among the Vedic Indians.

To further elucidate this point, let us explore passage X. 48.2 of the Rigveda, which reads:

"Kuha siddesa kuha vastarasvina kuha bhi pitram karatah kuhasatuh Kovam saugutra Vidhaiva devaram maryam na yosa krnute sodhastha a."

Griffith's English translation of this verse reads:

"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?"

Upon reflection, it is our considered opinion that this verse subtly alludes to the practice of 'niyoga,' which is otherwise mentioned discreetly. This inference is drawn from the analogy drawn between a widow drawing her husband's brother to bed and a bride attracting her groom. This passage's nuanced interpretation, corroborated by the works of smritikaras like Viswarupa and Medhatithi²⁶ and Dr. R. C. Majumdar, suggests a reference to 'Niyoga.' The Mahabharata furnishes a poignant example of 'niyoga,' describing sage Vasistha's cohabitation with Queen Madayanti of King Sudasa or Kalmaspada, which led to the birth of Asmaka. Therefore, the passage (X. 40.2) seems to underscore the existence of 'niyoga' in the Vedic society, providing a significant departure from the conventional notions of widowhood and marriage.

The exegesis of hymn X.18 of the Rigveda and the ensuing interpretations reveal the complex societal norms and customs pertaining to widowhood in Vedic India. While these interpretations may vary, they unanimously highlight the vital role of widows in upholding societal continuity and their intricate engagement with the rites of death and remarriage.

The interpretations of ancient Vedic texts regarding the practice of widow remarriage and continuity of lineage in the Aryan civilization remain a matter of scholastic contention. Critical to this discussion is the concept of 'Niyoga', a traditional practice allowing a man to cohabit with his childless sister-in-law to perpetuate the family line. Eminent scholars have offered varying viewpoints on this matter, but a comprehensive and objective analysis necessitates a return to the original scriptures for illumination.

Contrary to the views held by some scholars, a close reading of the Vedic texts does not necessarily indicate that a 'devara' (the younger brother of a deceased man) was expected to marry his elder brother's widow to ensure lineage continuity. It is essential to remember that the devara held a temporary privilege of assuming the role of a husband under the provisions of 'Niyoga'. This arrangement was not a marriage in the strictest sense but a temporary solution for lineage continuity. As noted by the ancient grammarian Yaska, a devara was referred to as a 'dwitiya varah' (second husband), further underlining the transient nature of this relationship. Given that 'Niyoga' was sanctioned during the Vedic era, it would be logically inconsistent to infer that a devara was compelled to marry his brother's widow. Therefore, the arguments put forth by these scholars seem untenable upon thorough analysis.

Furthering the discussion on widow remarriage, the authors of the "Vedic Index" draw attention to verses IX. 5.27-28 of the Atharvaveda, implying the presence of widow remarriage during the Atharvavedic period.²⁷ They cite these passages, which hint at the reunion of a husband and his second wife in the afterlife, as evidence.

Before delving into the merit of these claims, let us examine the passages in question:

"Ya purvam patrin vittva-thanyam undateparam Pancadananca tavajam dadato na vi-yosatah Samano loko bharati punarbhabha parah patih Yo jam pancadanam dkasinah jyotisam datati."

In the third line of this passage, the term 'punarbhabha' appears, linking both verses with a 'punarbhu', a term thoroughly elucidated by later Hindu Smrtikaras. According to Kasypa's interpretation, there exist seven categories of 'punarbhu':

1. A girl previously promised in marriage.
2. A girl who was intended to be given in marriage.
3. A girl upon whose wrist the auspicious band was tied by the bridegroom.
4. A girl whose father had performed the symbolic water-gift ritual during betrothal.
5. A girl whose hand was held by the bridegroom in the marriage ritual.
6. A girl who took part in the ritual of circumambulation around the sacred fire.
7. A girl born from a 'punarbhu' of the above six categories.²⁷

Raghunandana's Udvahtattva quotes these classifications from the Dharmasastras, with an injunction that a man should not accept a 'punarbhu'²⁸ from any of these categories as his wife. Thus, an objective reading of these passages does not conclusively advocate for the practice of widow remarriage in the Vedic era. It instead underscores the complex societal and religious norms of the time, necessitating a nuanced understanding of these ancient customs.

Analysing the socio-cultural norms and marital practices in Vedic India requires a deep understanding of the ancient scriptures and their various interpretations. In this respect, the role of punarbhu and the remarriage of widows in Vedic society is a matter of considerable debate among scholars. The term punarbhu refers to a woman who has been betrothed but not married, and there is some discrepancy among the Smrtikaras (codifiers of ancient Hindu law) about the exact categorisation of a punarbhu. The eminent scholar Kane offers various classifications, further complicating the issue.

In relation to the verses IX. 5.27-28 of the Atharvaveda, some scholars, such as the authors of the "Vedic Index," infer that these passages hint at the remarriage of a widow, and a ritual or charm ensuring their reunion in the afterlife with a second husband. Contrarily, it appears more plausible that these verses prescribe sacrifices to atone for the sin associated with a woman remaining a punarbhu. This interpretation does not consider a punarbhu to be a remarried widow.²⁹ Whitney's translation of these verses into English reads:

"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."³⁰

Kane's translation offers a similar meaning:

"Whatever woman having first married one husband, marries another, if they (two) offer a goat with five rices dishes, they would not be separated (from each other). The second husband secures the same world with his re-married wife when he offers a goat accompanied with five rice dishes and with the light of fees."³¹

However, considering the use of the term punarbhu in the original passage, and the fact that widow remarriage has always been prohibited in Hindu sacred scriptures, it can be inferred that these verses from the Atharvaveda are referencing a punarbhu and not a widow. The prescribed penance was intended to absolve the sin of marrying a punarbhu and nothing more. Consequently, the English translations provided by Whitney and Kane may be considered flawed. Kane, nevertheless, proposes that these verses may prescribe a sacrifice to absolve the sin or inferiority stemming from the marriage to a betrothed woman.³²

The ancient legal text Manusmriti does sanction the marriage of a punarbhu with the younger brother of the intended bridegroom, indicating that this type of marriage was not entirely dismissed in ancient India.³³ Nevertheless, the consensus among Smrtikaras like Kasypa and others leaned towards an aversion for this kind of marriage. Dr. Barnett also refrains from endorsing the practice of widow remarriage during the Vedic age. Consequently, it can be confidently asserted that Vedic texts did not support widow remarriage.

Another important aspect that cannot be overlooked in this context is that child marriage was condoned by the ancient Smrtis. As societal norms evolved over the centuries, prescriptions for widows to live a life of celibacy

became stricter. Particularly during the late medieval period, the institution of Kulinism, especially in Bengal, and socio-economic conditions led to a significant increase in the number of child widows. Their plight deteriorated further, inciting social reformers in the early nineteenth century to spearhead a movement for the upliftment of Hindu widows and advocate for a widow marriage act. The vanguard of this movement was Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. Consequently, the Hindu Widow Marriage Act was enacted on July 26, 1856, legitimizing the offspring from such marriages.

CONCLUSION

The study points to a complex understanding of widowhood and remarriage in Vedic India. An in-depth analysis of the ancient Vedic scriptures suggests that the dominant cultural and religious norms did not favour widow remarriage. Rather, widowhood was regulated by stringent societal norms and customs. The practice of 'Niyoga' was a societal construct designed to ensure lineage continuity, but it did not constitute remarriage in the conventional sense. Furthermore, references to 'punarbhu' in the Atharvaveda do not explicitly advocate for widow remarriage. Instead, they seem to prescribe rituals to absolve the sin associated with marrying a woman who had been previously betrothed. The manuscript strongly affirms that the commonly accepted notion of widow remarriage, as practiced in contemporary society, does not find substantiated endorsement in the Vedic texts. Therefore, it is critical to approach these ancient customs with a nuanced understanding, acknowledging the intricate societal norms that governed them.

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Conflict of Interest

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