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Dr. Jnanashree Devi

Research Scholar,
Department of Sanskrit,
Assam University, Silchar, Assam.

‘Widowhood’ State of Life or Curse: An Observation in the Light of Mahābhārata

Dr. Jnanashree Devi

Abstract:

A woman lives her life in many forms, like mother, sister, wife, daughter and others. A woman is known as a widow after the death of her husband. She was known by a different identity in the society. A widow is a sympathetic form of a woman that was given to her after the death of her husband. It's an accidental state of life but for women, it stands as like a curse. Due to economic and physical insecurities, widowhood is a disaster in a woman's life. Here we are going to discuss about the status of widows described in the Mahābhārata. Their conflicts, insecurities and problems are taking place under this observation.

Keywords: Mahābhārata, Widow, Widowhood, Woman.

Introduction:

In the Mahābhārata status of widow reflect an important side of women's life. The effect of the death of husband remains on his wife for her whole life, but it is not seen in the case of another relative's death. A woman gets a different identity in the society. And that identity becomes like a curse for women at some point in time. Widowhood becomes not only just an identity but also it became a woman's whole life. After all, why widowhood is so important? When we go to find the answer to this question, the first thing that comes into our vision is the place of the husband in society. Even in the society of the Mahābhārata time, the position of the husband was very high. In the Anuśāsaṇa Parva, it is mentioned that the service of the husband is the biggest religion in the world. For a woman, the husband is her deity and her ultimate destiny.¹ It has been said again that a woman doesn't need to perform any yajña, śrādhā and fasting, her only religion is service to her husband, from this women would have conquered heaven.² Due to this God-like place of the husband, his absence in the life of a woman would have been so affected. So the death of a husband changed a woman's life. We are going to discuss below about this changed stage in the lives of women described in the Mahābhārata.

Satī:

Widowhood itself is a curse for a woman. In many places in ancient India, it was customary to burn widows along with the body of their husbands. This is called satī dāha system. The term satī is used for that woman who is a virtuous or a good wife. According to Monier-Williams, that satī means a good and virtuous faithful wife, who burns herself with her husband's corpse. In the Mahābhārata, the practice of satī is not seen in the traditional form. But the practice of satī was not even prohibited in the society of that time. Yes, it was true that at that time the practice of satī was not compulsory. In association with satī custom, the concept of Sahamaraṇa or Anumaraṇa exists in the Mahābhārata. It has been said that whether the husband is in the world, has died, or is lying alone in hell, the virtuous woman follows him. If a virtuous woman dies first, then she waits for her

Correspondence:

Dr. Jnanashree Devi

Research Scholar,
Department of Sanskrit,
Assam University, Silchar, Assam.

husband in the hereafter. A satī woman follows her husband from behind.³ Here the words Sahamarāṇa or Anumarāṇa are not directly applied, but the concept is the same. Its essence is this; a chaste woman follows her husband wherever he goes after his death. The Kapotaupākhyāna of the Śānti Parva strengthens this concept. There is an anecdote about the death of a female pigeon following her husband's male pigeon. After the death, she got a place in heaven along with her husband. That is why it is said in the Mahābhārata that a woman who follows her husband like a female pigeon is soon situated in heaven and illuminated by her brilliance.⁴

Examples of wives voluntarily sacrificing their lives at the death of their husbands are found in many places in the Mahābhārata. Mādrī's death is one such example.⁵ On the death of Pāṇḍu, his eldest wife Kuntī also raised the issue of co-death. But Mādrī's logical words and firm principles forced Kuntī to change her decision. Mādrī gave up her life because of her love for Pāṇḍu and the feeling of guilt inside her. In front of her guilt, Mādrī gave up her life on Pāṇḍu's death. Apart from this, on the death of Vasudeva, the description of the co-death of his four wives is found in the Mahābhārata. Devikā, Bhadrā, Rohinī and Madīrā, the four wives of Vasudeva ready for co-death together on the death of Vasudeva.⁶ Sitting on the burning pyre of Vasudeva, all four of them ended their lives with the dead body of Vasudeva. In this manner, we have found examples of the wife choosing to autocratically death only after the death of her husband in the Mahābhārata.

Apart from co-death, another example is found in the Mahābhārata of wives ending their lives in the memory of their husbands. Many days after Kṛṣṇa's death, his wives had immersed their lives by entering the fire.⁷ In the same way, we found examples of Jalasamādhi in the Gaṅgā of the wives of Kauravas.⁸ This event took place many years after the Kurukṣetra war. Here a question arises, what such reasons had come in front of the women that they had to end their lives? Here only one answer comes in front of us, and that is the insecurity of those women. The husband provides physical security to the wife. After the death of the husband, her son provides security to the woman. But a woman who does not have a son feels insecure after the death of her husband. This is what happened to Kṛṣṇa's wives after his death. They feel that Kṛṣṇa was no more to protect them and the protector to whom Kṛṣṇa handed them over was not capable of protecting them. Because they had seen, that Arjuna was not able to save some of the other women with them, from the clutches of the bandits.⁹ So, those people have doubts about their safety. For them, it was better to give life in the fire than to have a disgraceful life at the hands of the robber. We do not see any inconvenience caused by physical security in the lives of the widows of

Kauravas who died in the Kurukṣetra war. But there is also a lack of position and power in the lives of those people. The place and power that they enjoyed in society during the presence of their husbands were snatched from them after their husband's death. Due to the absence of economic and physical power, widows always played a sympathetic role in society. So, maybe for that reason they feel insecure and they commit suicide.

Indeed, the Satī custom was not compulsorily followed in the time of the Mahābhārata.

Insecurities of Widows:

In a male-dominated society, questions related to the safety of women are arising everywhere. Women were almost fully dependent on male persons in their houses. At an early stage, they were dependent on their father and brother, in middle age on their husband and at the last stage of their life they were dependent on their son. If a woman becomes a widow at the young age of her son or childless then her life becomes very difficult. In this regard, we get to know clearly from the mouth of the Brāhmaṇa lady in the Ādiparva of the Mahābhārata. Brāhmaṇa lady described the change in her life if her husband died at the hands of Vakāsura. The pain of potential widowhood is visible in the words of Brāhmaṇa. She tells her husband that if he survives, he can make his son virtuous, in the same way, she cannot make her son virtuous without him.¹⁰ She also says that without a husband she will not be able to protect her daughter. Any unworthy person would disregard her and want to get her daughter. And even if she does not want to give her daughter to an unworthy man, then they could forcefully take her away from her widowed mother.¹¹ Through this, we can learn about the security issue of widows in the Mahābhārata society. At that time a widow was not even able to protect her children. Anyone can disgrace her. The condition of the wives of the soldiers killed in the war was even more deplorable. For example, we can take the case of the plight of the wives of Nivātakvaca, who were killed by Arjuna.

When we talk about the insecurities of women then the first thing that comes to our mind is physical insecurity. Physically often, a woman needs the protection of a man. Before marriage, their father or brother protects them. After marriage, a woman becomes the responsibility of her husband. In old age, her son protected her. If a woman becomes a widow at an early age of her child or childless then she feels physical insecurity. For example, we can take the widowed wives of Kṛṣṇa, who were by force taken away by the robbers.¹² Even Kuntī had to struggle a lot in her life as a widow. Being a royal woman, she faced much physical insecurity in her life. Economic insecurity is a major problem for a widow. In the time of the Mahābhārata, women were not economically self-supporting. They had to

be financially dependent on their father, husband or son. So, the economic condition of a woman becomes very bad after the death of her husband. That is why the Mahābhārata has been exhorted to manage the widow's profession so that she can be financially strong.¹³ In the Mahābhārata the word 'Abalā' has been used for women at various places. And this word is fully applicable to widows. 'Abalā' means a lady who had had no power. A widow also had no power in that society. If a widow has any property, people can snatch it from her and take it away.¹⁴ That is why in the Mahābhārata, preaching has been given about the protection of the property of widows. It is said in the Mahābhārata that a king should take care of the widowed wives of soldiers killed in the battle for him.¹⁵ Where insecurities come there, also the question of protection arises. Economically, in the society of that time, the widow had insecurity so the king was instructed to provide security to her. Despite being the widowed wife of a former king, Kuntī was economically insecure. Kuntī had no right over her husband's kingdom after the death of her husband. That is why she had to struggle so hard to give her sons their ancestral kingdom.

Remarriage of Widow:

We have already said that during the time of the Mahābhārata, the polygamy system of men was prevalent in society. But there was no scope for a second marriage in the life of a woman. Nowhere in the Mahābhārata is there a direct mention of widow remarriage. But the use of the words Punarbhū, Parapūrvā, and Anyapūrvā proves that widow remarriage in some places in the society of that time. However, the evidence also proves that this practice was unpopular. It is found in the Mahābhārata that a Brāhmaṇa born from the womb of a widowed mother should be kept away from śrādhā karma.¹⁶ In the same way, it is found in the epic that the Piṇḍa given in the śrādhā by the son born out of the second marriage of a woman became in vain.¹⁷ From all this, it is proved that the practice of remarriage of widows was quite a lot. It is also said in the Anuśāsaṇa Parva that in the absence of a husband, a woman makes her brother-in-law husband.¹⁸ Maybe that is why the husband's brother is called Devara in Sanskrit. According to Nirukta, "देवरः कस्मात् द्वितीयो वर उच्यते", that means the second husband. The same thing is described in the Śānti Parva.¹⁹ However, the concept of remarriage of a woman was socially not acceptable at that time. People used to think that a woman could be married only once.

Outfit of Widow:

When a woman turns into a widow then it also affects her costume. As soon as a woman becomes a widow, her beauty is meaningless. So, generally, all the makeup that woman does to make they look beautiful, are eliminated from the life of a widow. In many places of the Mahābhārata, a

widow is compared with a shine or beauty less earth.²⁰ In the Droṇa Parva of the Mahābhārata, the beauty less army of Kauravas was compared with the beautiful widow.²¹ After the death of husband her beauty also becomes meaningless. That's why on the death of her husband, all the colours of a woman's life fade away. Its effect also comes on her dress. At various places in the Mahābhārata, we find descriptions of widows wearing white clothes. After the battle of Kurukṣetra, the house of the Kauravas looked like a white mountain due to the white clothes of their widows.²² In the same way, we get the example of Kauravas' widowed wives wearing white clothes in the Āśramvāsika Parva of the Mahābhārata.²³ Not only this, these widows used to cover themselves with a single white cloth.²⁴

Whenever we talk about a woman's make-up, her hairstyle comes first. The widowhood of a woman affects her hairstyle also. In the Mahābhārata, at the time of the description of the costume of widows, their open hair has been specially described. The open hair of widows is spoken in different ways in different places in the Mahābhārata. 'Prakīrya Keśān',²⁵ 'Prakīrṇakeśā',²⁶ 'Muktakeśī',²⁷ and others differently described the open hair of widows. From this, we can guess that at the time of the Mahābhārata, the widow's hair was not adorned. Apart from this, the widows of that time did not take vermilion on their foreheads. For example, we can take the description of the Kauravas widows in the Āśramavāsika Parva of the Mahābhārata. To introduce them the author of the epic used the word 'Sīmantaśīroruhā'.²⁸ In the same way, widowed woman discard ornaments and garlands from their bodies.²⁹ This change in the outfit of widows is seen not only in Ārya women but also in the Anārya women. We get evidence of this in the description of the widows of Nivatakbaca demons. The necklaces and ornaments of the wives of the demons were lying here and there after Arjuna killed the demons.³⁰ This proves that even in the Anārya society during the Mahābhārata period, there was a ban on the outfit of widows.

Widow's own viewpoint regarding widowhood:

The environment we live in affects our ideology. The law and order that has been made in the life of a woman after the death of her husband are not pleasurable at all. These rules have disturbed the natural life of a woman. Accordingly, women should oppose all these rules. But it doesn't seem to happen. The women of the society of that time did not take any positive view on widowhood. Even in some places, widowhood is considered as a curse. Women themselves think they get widowhood because of their previous birth sin. In the Ādiparva of the Mahābhārata, Bhadrā gives this type of viewpoint about her

widowhood.³¹ But we do not see this sense of sin in losing the life partner of any man. A woman's life changes a lot only after the death of her husband. After losing her husband, the woman herself does not want to live happily for the rest of her life. That's why many women accept co-death along with their husbands. Many women go to the forest for penance after the death of their husbands. As, after the death of Kṛṣṇa, his other wives and Satyabhāmā went out to the forest to do penance.³² The widowed women, who were living a social life for the upbringing of their child or because of any other reason, also adopt Vānaprastha in the last stage of their life. Like Satyawatī, Ambikā, Ambālikā and Kuntī. But those people stay away from enjoyment while they live socially. We get the proof of this from the speech of Kuntī. While she going into exile, Kuntī had said that when her husband was alive, she had completed all the pleasures of her life, now she had no desire for all these indulgences.³³ This proves that in the society of that time, widowhood was poor and unhappy from the widow's viewpoint.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion, we get to know about the status of widows in the Mahābhārata age. If we turn around in the present era then we get to see widowhood is a little relaxing for women. The involvement of the legal system makes widows' lives a little better in the present time which was absent in the Mahābhārata time. Economic insecurity is solved through property rights but other insecurities stand as a shadow with women in the present time also. The present society treats widows as sympathetic creatures. From that time to this time society doesn't want to see a woman without the authority of a man. Marriage transfers the guardianship of a woman from her father to her husband. So after the death of her husband, she was free from any guidance. In that case, to stop her from taking the path of independence the patriarchal society imposes many hard rules and makes her life difficult. This difficulty wavered women in the same thread from the Mahābhārata time to the present time very negatively. So we can say that from the Mahābhārata time to the present time, widowhood stands as a curse for women.

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