



Women's Struggle Faced in the Indian Society

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ABSTARCT - In Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Dayananda, the best of Hinduism was blended with the modern spirit of humanism which was flooding India of the nineteenth century. A new inspiration was abroad and under its urge the medieval molds, already weakened, began to break down. The individual realized the significance of the self as well as a new responsibility towards society.

Culturally and socially, India has a long way to go before women are genuinely treated as equals in the social set up. Throughout history, women have generally been restricted to the role of a homemaker; that of another and wife.

From the few and scattered references in contemporary literature, it is evident that both the communities, Hindus and Muslims, observed their rites and ceremonies in much the same manner as they do today. Of the 16 principal ceremonies prescribed by Hindu law givers, only six, viz., Jatakarma (birth ceremony) Namakarana (name-giving ceremony), Chuda-karana (hair-cutting ceremony)¹,

Upanayana (initiation) and Vivaha (marriage) and certain other rites were observed by the majority of the Hindus. Abul Fazl describes the birth ceremony, when honey stirred in ghee is put into the mouth of the infant by means of a gold ring. In Bengal the womenfolk would pour down a shower of grains of paddy and tufts of green grass on the head of the new-born praying for his long life. Tulsidas in his famous Ramcharit Manas (The Deeds of Rama) and Surdas in his great poetical composition Sur Sagar (Ocean of Sur) refer to the performance of Nandimukh Sradha .

¹ Ibid,p.12

After the birth when offerings of gold, cows, plates and jewels were made to the Brahmans. A cord made of durba grass interwoven with mango leaves was usually hung over the main door as a mark of festivity. The horoscope was invariably drawn soon after a child's birth. The Namakarana ceremony was usually performed after the expiry of the period of confinement, lasting forty days. In Bengal they observed the custom of putting a tilak on the child's forehead after mixing curd, milk and haldi (turmeric). The custom of ascertaining on this occasion the natural bent of a child by placing several articles such as paddy, fried rice, a clod of earth, gold, silver, etc², before him and watching him choose any one of those was also prevalent, particularly in Bengal. The ceremony of Annaprasana (or giving solid food to the child for the first time), it appears, was performed when the child was six months old. Khir, honey and ghee, according to the poet Surdas, would be placed before the child whose father would feed this to him after the observance of ceremonies. The Mundan, or the hair-cutting ceremony, was celebrated with due rites not earlier than the age of three leaving one lock on the top of the head. The ears of the child were also bored usually on that day. The Upanayana or the sacred thread ceremony was performed before the age of eight in the presence of a large number of Brahmans. The sacred thread consisting of three threads each composed of three finer intertwined threads was hung on the left shoulder of the boy, the ends tied round the right arm. The three threads represent the Trinity—the Hindu Gods Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh- and the white colour signifies purity. Being thus invested with the sacred thread, the boy begins his studies. The boy was usually initiated to a mantra (Gayatri) by the Guru before commencing his studies. Brahmans were offered presents and the poor were given alms. The ceremony of Samavartana was performed when the student returned home after the completion of his studies.

MUSLIM CEREMONIES

The craving for a male child was intense among the Muham- madans. The Italian traveller Manucci (1653-1708) relates in detail the rejoicings which followed the birth of a son in a rich family. It was customary to pour honey into the infant's mouth immediately after birth and to press his mother's breast that "a drop of milk comes out" Azan, or the Muslim call to prayer, was sounded in the ears of the infant. Akbar not only followed the Hindu practice of drawing horoscopes, but also visited Fatehpur Sikri to see his new born son Salim in deference to the prevalent belief among the Hindus that "whenever God after long expectation has bestowed an auspicious child, he be not produced before the honored father till after a long delay?"

The naming ceremony was performed on the very day of his birth when the grandfather would bestow a name. Manucci refers to celebrations on the Chhathi, the sixth day. It was customary, after bathing the child, to put on a shirt made out of a dress worn by some holy men. Akbar's first clothes were made out of garments of the Saint Sayyid Ali Shirazi. The Aqigah rites, a sacrifice of two goats for a boy and one for a girl, were usually performed

² H.R. Mehta, *A History of Growth and Development of Western Education in the Punjab*, (1846-84), Lahore: Govt. Printing 1929, p.62

on the seventh day. The first shaving of the child was also done on this day. Abul Fazl specially alludes to a Turkish custom adopted by the Mughals³. When a child began to walk, it was usual for the father or the grandfather to strike it with his turban so that he might fall down. The Bismillah, or more properly the Maktab, ceremony was performed when a boy was four years, four months and four days old. Circumcision or the Sunnat ceremony, was performed with pomp and show. Akbar prohibited this rite before the age of 12 and even then left it to the boy to decide.

EARLY MARRIAGES

Early marriages were in vogue in both the communities in almost all parts of India excepting Assam where they were prevalent only among Brahmans and Kshatriyas.⁴ Political and social circumstances compelled a father, at least among the Hindus, to have his daughter married as early as possible. Custom forbade girls to remain in the house of their parents for more than six. to eight years from birth. These early marriages were no doubt in the nature of betrothals, since the actual consummation took place much later, usually after the attainment of puberty, but the fact remains that the evil had become universal and coercive and no attempt was made to check it till the age of Akbar. He issued orders that boys were not to marry before the age of 16 and girls before .He was also of the opinion that the consent of the bride and bridegroom together with the permission of the parents was essential for the confirmation of a marriage. This order was neither rigorously enforced nor renewed by the later Emperors.

MARRIAGE RESTRICTIONS

Inter-caste marriages were out of fashion among the Hindus. Akbar, however, did not like marriages between near and dear ones. He also tried to do away with the evil practice of a young man marrying an older woman quite often attracted by her wealth. Akbar issued orders that if a woman happened to be older than her husband by 12 years, the marriage should be considered illegal and annulled⁵.

DOWRY SYSTEM

The marriage rites and ceremonies of Hindus and Muslims were observed in much the same manner as today. The dowry system seems to have been quite harsh and many a poor father had not the means to pay the dowry wedding outfits for his daughter. Tukaram, the greatest of Maharashtra's saints, was able to get his daughter married only through the contribution of the villagers. Mughal Kings, too, used to accept huge dowries. Akbar was, no doubt, against this custom, but he made no effort to check this evil practice.

³ *Ibid*,p.63

⁴ *Ibid*,p.65

⁵ Harbans Singh (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, Vol. IV, Patiala Punjabi University, 1998, p. 210

WIDOW REMARRIAGE

Widow Remarriage, except among the lower caste Hindus, had disappeared almost completely in Hindu society during the early medieval age. No efforts were made to reintroduce the custom by any of the medieval rulers. Akbar, too, did not think it advisable to enforce widow remarriage, though he declared it to be lawful. He was of the opinion that a young girl, who had got no enjoyment from her husband, should not be burnt, but if the Hindus took it ill, she should be married to a widower.

POLYGAMY

Polygamy, which seems to have been prevalent among the upper and middle class Muhammadan families, attracted Akbar's attention. Hindus, with the exception of a small number of princes and very wealthy persons, practiced monogamy and such was the case with the majority of Muhammadans⁶. Hindu law did not permit a person to divorce his wife excepting in the extreme cases- if she proved to be barren or was adulterous. There were no such restrictions among Muhammadans whose law ordains: Marry whatever woman you like, either three each or four each. Polygamy brought many evils in its train. Domestic unhappiness and immorality, in some cases at least, was the natural consequence. No check what-sever was put on this practice till the reign of Akbar, who consulted the ulema, in his famous Ibadat Khana (House of Worship) at Fatehpur Sikri. In spite of the decision of the ulema that a man might marry any number of wives by mutah but only four by nikah, Akbar was bold enough to issue orders that a man of ordinary means should practice polygamy unless the first proved to be barren. He considered it highly injurious to a man's health and also detrimental to domestic peace to keep more than one wife⁷.

Marriage Customs: The selection of a match was left solely to the discretion of the parents. The boy had little say while the girl, with the exception of upper class Rajput virgins, had none at all. Usually there were purhotanis, or female match-makers, who knew of all eligible parties and could both suggest suitable matches and negotiate them. Awwals performed the same function among the Muslims. A liberal King like Akbar was of the opinion, as already stated, that the consent of the bride and bridegroom and the permission of the parents should be essential before the confirmation of the marriage. A marriage tax ranging from one dam to 10 muhurs, according to the status of the parties, was also charged by the government. Royal consent had to be obtained before a marriage amongst the children of the nobles could be arranged. It is interesting to note that the usual practice among the Mughal Kings was not to marry their daughters. Aurangzeb, however, did not follow this probably under the influence of Muslim fairs and married off two of his daughters--Mehr un Nisa and Zubdat un Nisa⁸.

⁶ *Ibid*,p.212

⁷ *Ibid*,p.215

⁸ K.P. Karunakaran, *Religion and Political Awakening in India*, Jhansi Publishers, Meerut, 1982, P.110.

The marriage ceremonies of the Hindus and Muslims were more or less the same as they are today. When both parties agreed to enter into a matrimonial alliance, the betrothal ceremony was performed on an auspicious day selected by the astrologers when a tilak was put on the forehead of the bridegroom and presents offered.

MARRIAGE RITUALS

Though Hindu marriage rituals differ from caste to caste, from tribe to tribe and from province to province, the religious and social conservatism has been so strong that the outlines of the samskaras, as Abul Fazl, the author of *Ain-i-Akbari*, noted were observed in much the same manner everywhere as in Vedic times: The contemporary works, such as *Ramcharit Manas*, *Sur Sagar* and *Padamavat*, give some details about the ceremonies. The bridal procession with the richly clad bridegroom seated on a decorated horse, supported by a grown-up man seated behind him started from the house of the bridegroom⁹. It was headed by bandsmen dressed in multicolored clothes with an odd array of instruments. A large number of friends and relations accompanied the procession, which was sumptuously feted at the house of the bride. The most important rituals were the bride and the bridegroom garlanding each other, the three-fold circumambulation of the fire, the seven steps taken together by the wedded pair, the kanyadan or solemn handing over of the maiden by her father to the bridegroom, and finally the journey of the bride and the bridegroom to the latter's home. These ceremonies were performed by a priest who read appropriate mantras from the Vedas invoking God's blessings on the couple. It was essential for the bride to wear red bracelets. Presents in cash, gold and clothes were offered by the father of the bride to the bridegroom and some of his relations. As a gesture of goodwill Akbar is said to have ordered that the village officials should present two narials (coconuts), one on their own behalf and the other on behalf of the Mughal Emperor.

MUSLIM MARRIAGE CEREMONIES

The marriage celebrations among the Muhammadans, began with the sending of sachaq (four precious gifts along with henna--a red dye) from the bride. Fruits and sweetmeats arranged in beautiful trays along with some cash were also sent. Shah Jahan sent a sachaq worth Rs. two lakhs to the house of the bride on the marriage of his eldest son, Dara Shikoh. The groom's hands were dyed red with henna by the ladies of his family who usually concealed themselves behind a curtain. The qazi performed the rest of the ceremonies. It included the formal consent of the bride to the match, the recitation by the bridegroom of the usual prayers and an announcement of the mehr or marriage settlement. The marriage ceremonies would conclude by the recitation of a chapter from the Quran which invoked God's blessings on the couple.

⁹ Abbe Dubois, *A view of Hindoo manners, Customs, and Ceremonies*, Loutal press, London, 1897, p.23

EXPENSIVE MARRIAGES

Weddings have always been an expensive affair in India. Several foreign travelers refer to lavish expenditure on feasting, ornaments, music, fireworks, etc. A Hindu of ordinary means would spend four to five thousand rupees on a marriage¹⁰. The well-to-do would spend about rupees forty to fifty thousand. Some of the Bengali merchants spent about a lakh of rupees besides making innumerable presents. Sometimes the marriage was celebrated in a simpler way

when only the bride and bridegroom and a priest were present. No gifts were offered or received.

FUNERAL CUSTOMS

Great Stress was laid upon the funeral ceremonies among the Hindus to whom the next world is more important than the present one. The important rituals were cremation, udakkarma, asaucha, asthi sanchayana, santikarma and sapindikaran. Abul Fazl enumerates certain classes to whom the privilege of burning was denied. Inhumation (burial, preferably water burial) was, however, resorted to, as prescribed by the scriptures, in the case of small children and ascetics. A dying man would be lifted from the bed and placed on a floor, smeared with cow dung and strewn with green grass, with his head pointing towards the north. Holy Ganges water was poured on his forehead and a tulsi leaf (*ocymum sanctum*) was placed on his breast. The gift of a cow to act as his guide over the stream marking the boundary of the other world, in addition to several edibles, was regarded as being very auspicious for his future welfare¹¹. Abul Fazl has referred to a curious custom which was sometimes followed in Bengal. A person on his death bed would be carried to a nearby river where the lower half of his body would be immersed at the moment of death. Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh sect, refers to the Indian custom of tearing the top of a letter when announcing the death of a relative. This custom is followed even today. The Hindus in general, it appears, followed the prescribed rules which forbade certain things during the period of defilement (which varied from one to ten days and even months according to caste, age, relationship, etc.) such as the cutting of the hair and beard, study of the Vedas, offering of oblations to the deities, etc.

The positive rules, which enjoined -for a period of three days-continence, sleeping on the ground, living on begged or purchased food and eating only during the day, were also observed. Gaudy dresses were avoided and the women covered their heads with white dopattas as a sign of mourning. Sanchayana, or the ceremony of collecting the bones and ashes, took place after an interval of four to ten days varying according to the different castes¹². The bones, after being washed in milk, were thrown into a river, preferably the Ganges. The period of mourning ended on the thirteenth day when some offerings were made to the heir of the deceased by the relatives. Sraddha, which Abul Fazl describes as the charity given in the name of the deceased, was observed

¹⁰ Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19th Century Punjab*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1976, pp. 109-111

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.113

¹² *The Akhbar-i-Anjuman-i-Punjab*, Report on the Native Newspapers, Punjab, 1880, p.9

usually on the anniversary of the deceased's death. Its significance and mode of performance has been described at length in the Ain-i-Akbari.

MUHAMMADAN MOURNING CUSTOMS

Like those of the Hindus, the Muslim funeral customs have not changed much since the days of the Sultans. The Yasin chapter of the Quran was read by the death bed and the face of the dying person usually turned towards Mecca. Sharbat, or holy water from the Zamzam well at Mecca, if available, might be poured down his throat to "facilitate exit of the vital spark". Death was announced by using certain euphemisms, especially in the case of great men. For example, 'Emperor Babar departed from the fleeting world for the everlasting abode in paradise'.¹³ In case of the death of a prince or a dear one of the Emperor, the wakil of the deceased would appear before the King with a blue handkerchief tied around his arm. The dear and near ones of the deceased would tear off their clothes and throw dust on their heads¹⁴. The body, covered with flowers and heavily perfumed, was carried in a manner befitting the deceased's position in life to the burial ground. If a noble, his insignia of rank, flags, elephants, cavalry, etc. were taken in a procession. The period of mourning lasted for forty days. The Hindu custom of getting oneself shaved after the death of a dear one seems to have been followed by the Muhammadans also. Dainty dishes and gaudy dresses were avoided during this period. On hearing of Nizam-ud-din Auliyas death, Amir Khusrau tore off his garments. Jahangir refused to change his dress for some days on the death of Qutub-ud-din Koka's mother whom he regarded as his own mother. Shah Jahan too gave up the use of coloured garments on the death of his beloved wife, Mumtaz. Mahal. He would not listen to music and even abandoned the customary feasts. It was customary for the relations of the deceased to sleep on the ground during the period of mourning. The mourning ended on the fortieth day when the relatives visited the grave and distributed food, clothes, and money to the poor in the name of the deceased. The anniversary of the death was observed in a befitting manner. Jahangir refers to this custom which the Muhammadans borrowed from Hindus. Food was prepared according to the survivors' means

and distributed among the poor after reciting the fatiha¹⁵. The rich would illuminate the tombs of their ancestors while the common the Indian custom of providing for the dead in the same manner as during their life time. The tombs of the rich were decorated and elephants and horses were tied near the gate. Reciters, or khatmi, were appointed to read the Quran. The tombs of the saints built through the generosity of the rich were visited by devotees. Aurangzeb, like Firuz Tughluq, was opposed. to the visit of women to the cemeteries. The orthodox Emperor did not even like roofs over tombs and the white-washing of the structures.

¹³ Ibid,p.11

¹⁴ David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, Muslim Solidarity in British India, p.106.

¹⁵ Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikh*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1963,p.63