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DEPT OF HISTORY

S.A. COLLEGE

P.K.M.



ROOTS

International Journal of Multidisciplinary Researches

A Peer Reviewed, Refereed & Quarterly Journal with Impact Factor

Vol : 4

Special Issue 3

March 2018

ISSN : 2349-8684

UGC Approved Journal (J. No. 48991)



**CENTRE FOR RESOURCE, RESEARCH &
PUBLICATION SERVICES (CRRPS)**

www.crrps.in

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WIDOW REMARRIAGE MOVEMENT IN TAMILNADU

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Abstract

The first important step towards the removal of the restrictions against widow marriage was the publication in 1855 by Isvara Chandra Vidyasagar of his work on widow remarriage in Bengali. Little children of five to ten years were being married. According to the census reports between 1921 and 1931, there were 175 widows in every 1000 females in 1921 and the figure had fallen to 155 in 1931. The life of a widow was to be that of an ascetic. It was a life of Nonbu (or) Penance. It was a degraded life. To a woman, life was worthwhile and filled only while the husband was alive. So it was called *Kaimmai*, and such women were called *Kaimpen*. A relentless struggle for widow remarriage in Tamil Nadu was led both by Brahmin and non-Brahmin leaders. Srinivasa Pillai, a social reformer, founded the Hindu Progressive Improvement Society in Madras on November 1852, with widow remarriage as one of their chief aims. After him, Venkataroylu Naidu was supported to the passing of the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. On June 7 1883 it conducted its first widow remarriage in Mylapore, with procession and music through the streets of Mylapore and arranged a big dinner to the married couple.

The widow remarriage movement was entirely an indigenous one, and it enjoyed the sympathy of large number of educated Hindus at the early period.¹ The first important step towards the removal of the restrictions against widow marriage was the publication in 1855 by Isvara Chandra Vidyasagar of his work on widow remarriage in Bengali. The first widow remarriage was celebrated by him on 7th December 1856 at Calcutta that of Sri Chandra Vidyaratna with Kalima Debi.² Three more marriage followed in quick succession.

Little children of five to ten years were being married. This was one of the important reasons for more widowhood. According to the census reports between 1921 and 1931, there were 175 widows in every 1000 females in 1921 and the figure had fallen to 155 in 1931.³ The life of a widow was to be that of an ascetic. It was a life of *Nonbu* (or) Penance. It was a degraded life. To a woman, life was worthwhile and filled only while the husband was alive. So it was called *Kaimmai*, and such women were called *Kaimpen*. Her head was shaven clean, her *tali*, and other ornaments were removed. They were compelled to wear pure white cloth.⁴ In order to restrict the child marriage and to give a new life to the widows, the government passed some legislation and amended them. A relentless struggle for widow remarriage in Tamil Nadu was led both by Brahmin and non-Brahmin leaders. Srinivasa Pillai, a social reformer, founded the Hindu Progressive Improvement Society in Madras on November 1852, with widow remarriage as one of their chief aims. After him, Venkataroylu Naidu was supported to the passing of the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856.⁵

In 1873 a pleader in Nagercoil by Sesha Iyengar married off his widowed daughter according to Hindu rites. The orthodox section ostracised his family and barred them from entering temples and drawing water from public wells. Undaunted by this ostracism, he started the Widow Remarriage Society offering financial help for widow remarriage.

Other reformers like P. Chenstal Rao and Muthuswamy Iyer started the Madras Hindu Widow Marriage Association in 1874.⁶ In 1879 the widow Remarriage movement entered into a new phase. When K. Veerasalingam Pantlu (1848 – 1919) took up the cause. He was popularly known as the "Vidyasagar of South India" for the keen interest he evinced in the emancipation of women. He celebrated more than forty widow remarriages, established two girls schools and started two widow homes for destitute women. The Widow Re-marriage Association founded in 1852 was revived in 1880. In the early year of 1880 the social reformers of Madras inspired by the political leaders tried to have a close contact with the likeminded people in other parts of South India.⁷ At Madras, Veerasalingam Pantulu, Chenstal Rao and his followers R. Raghunatha Rao started the Hindu Women's Remarriage Association in 1882 with great zeal and devotion. This Association turned out a commendable work. They offered monetary incentives to those who gave information of virgin widows seeking remarriage and negotiated it. On 7th June 1883 it conducted its first widow remarriage in Mylapore, with procession and music through the streets of Mylapore and arranged a big dinner to the married couple.

The marriage was celebrated under the aegis of Raganatha Rao. A sum of Rs.800 was given to the Brahmin priest who performed the ceremonies. Sixteen sets of clothes were presented to the couple. Many guests chewed betel nuts, showing their approval for the marriage. A procession was arranged for three days which lent credence to the reforms. By the time Veerasalingam Pantulu shifted his residence to Madras in 1892. He had the satisfaction of performing twenty nine widow remarriages. But each marriage was performed with difficulties. In 1895 he founded a Widows Home in Madras. It served as a hostel cum school. This institution offered much succor to widows in the presidency.

G. Subramania Iyer, (1885 – 1916) a founder editor of 'The Hindu' strove hard to improve the lot of the women folk. He conducted the remarriage of his daughter who became a widow at the age of 12 before consummation. It was held on December 1889 at the venue of the fifth Indian National Congress Session at Bombay. His friends and relatives at Madras deserted him.⁸ As a result of the sustained campaign, widow remarriage took place both in Brahmin and non-Brahmin families. G. Subramania Iyer published many articles on the necessity for abolishing infanticide as well.⁹ He wished to raise the age of girls for marriage, which subsequently yielded fruit as the Age of the Consent Act 1891.

In 1887 Maha Govinda Ranade and R. Raganatha Rao formed the National Social Conference in Madras to provide assistance to the prothinkers related to the existing social evils and an All India Forum for discussion of social reforms.¹⁰ The National Social Conferences induced the spirit of nationalising the social problems and paved the way for the birth of many social reform organisations though of regional nature, particularly in Tamil Nadu. In 1891 Raganath Rao wrote to *The Hindu* that a child marriage was likely to take place in Triplicane and urged on the members of the Association to boycott the marriage. *The Hindu* vehemently criticised the child marriage. The battle waged by the Hindu in respect of widow remarriages continued even after 1900. Madras had the honor of being the birth place of the Indian National Social Conference which was first held in December 1887 under the Chairmanship of Madhava Rao.¹¹

It was decided in the Conference that annual conferences should be held in various parts of the country for considering and adopting measures necessary for the improvement of the status of the society and social usages.¹² It was further stated that Provincial Social Reform Associations should be started in all the provinces.

It was against this background that G. Subramania Iyer started the Hindu Social Reform Association on 9th November 1892 in Madras. Its objectives were to promote female education, marriage and domestic reforms and reforms in such customs and manners as were injurious and gradual amalgamation of castes.¹³ These objects were to be achieved by means of lectures and tracts and establishment of branch associations.

It is observed that due to the efforts of the Hindu Social Reform Association, in Madras nine widow remarriages took place in 1892 and seven Marriages in 1893. Complimenting, a marriage that took place on 18th September 1894, N.G. Chandavarkar, a champion of Widow Re-Marriage Movement wrote to K. Subba Rao, another social reformer in Madras. He stated that "I am much obliged to you for informing me of the widow marriage that is to come off at Madras on the 18th instant. The bride and the bridegroom have my full sympathy and I write a separate letter on the subject. I am also sending a wedding present for the lady".¹⁴ In its eleventh conference of the widow remarriage held at Amaravati in 1897, the Indian National Social Conference passed a resolution stating that the practice of men of more than fifty years age marrying young girls below twelve should be opposed to the spirit of the *Shastras* and it was extremely prejudicial to the interests of the community. The Conference discouraged all marriages where the difference of age between the parties exceeded thirty years.¹⁵

In spite of the legislations that were enacted to curb the child- marriage, it continued to take place. Re-marriage was deemed to be an unthinkable act, as the society was so rigid as to adopt it. The status of a family was determined by the virtue and fidelity of its own women members and so orthodox families were not bold enough to cross the borders set-forth by tradition. Measures were still needed to improve the lot of the widows as their condition continued to be pathetic. However, in due course, the growth of education and public awakening lessened the strains of widowhood and paved the way for a corresponding increase in the process of the re-marriage and rehabilitation of widows.¹⁶ The position that obtained in the nineteenth century has now changed. The society slowly accepted widow re-marriages without any social stigma. From 1920s a Widow Remarriage Association was functioning at Madras under the secretaryship of M. Chinnaiah Chettiar a social worker. It was a non political organisation and was rendering its due service in that direction. The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 was

amended in 1959. This act legalised the marriage of Hindu widows.¹⁷

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