



Widow Remarriage in Medieval Maharashtra: Generalization and Reality

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DOI - 10.5281/zenodo.18897791*

Abstract:

Colonial historians have concluded that the medieval period of India was a dark age. Colonial historians have proposed the theory of the Dark Ages by pointing out some of the bad practices of India at that time. While describing the condition of women in medieval Maharashtra, the Colonialist Historian seem to have generalized. In doing so, the Colonialist Historian seem to have applied the bad practices of women in certain communities to whole the society at that time. They generalized that Sati practice, ban on widow remarriage, widow hair shaving practice etc. bad practices had been common in medieval time of Indian society. But this colonial historian's generalization about the situation of women in medieval India cannot be accepted. Because in non-Brahmin communities in medieval Maharashtra, such practices as Sati and Widow Keshavpan should not be so prevalent because if such practices were prevalent in non-Brahmin communities, many examples of widow remarriage would not have been found in medieval documents. In the present research paper, an attempt has been made to discuss the generalizations and facts about widow remarriage through the Peshwa period widow remarriage agreements.

Keywords: *Generalization, Dark age, 'Mhoturacha Karar' (widow remarriage agreement)*

Introduction:

In India and similarly in Maharashtra, patriarchal society has existed since ancient times. In a patriarchal society, the position and status of women is always secondary. But, the position and status of women in India seems to be linked to the caste system. This means that the position, status and rights of women of different castes have different. Many times, historians often generalize in history writing. While describing the condition of women in medieval Maharashtra, the Colonialist Historian seem to have generalized. In doing so, the Colonialist Historian seem to have applied the bad practices of women in certain communities to whole the society at that time. They generalized that Sati practice, ban on widow remarriage, widow hair shaving practice etc. bad practices had been common in medieval time of Indian society. In the present research paper, an attempt has been made to discuss the

generalizations and facts about widow remarriage through the Peshwa period widow remarriage agreements.

The Condition of Widows in Medieval Maharashtra:

Some Historians generalize that the life of widows in Maharashtra was as miserable as in other parts of India during the medieval period. But in the Middle Ages, did the lives of widows in all communities become miserable? The widow marriage or remarriage was prohibited in all communities in that time? The answers to these questions have been try to sought through the present research paper.

During the medieval period, especially during the Peshwa period, girls became widows at a very young age due to constant wars, child marriages, Heterogeneous marriages (Virgin-old male marriage). When Nanasaheb Peshwa

married to Gopikabai at the age of 9 to 10 years, then Gopikabai was 4 to 5 years old. When the second Bajirao was 13 years old, he was married to 8- to 9 years old Bhagirathibai. These are just a few examples of child marriage of the Peshwa Period. The Peshwas themselves were doing child marriage and also issue orders for child marriage or early marriage of girls. In 1798-99, Second Bajirao Peshwa had issued an order that girls should be married on or before 9 years¹. Like child marriage, heterogeneous marriages (Virgin-old male marriage) also result in girls were becoming widows at an early age in Peshwa period. Heterogeneous marriage means that the groom's age is many times greater than the bride's age. Nanasaheb Peshwa was married to 9 years old girl at the age of 40 and only four months later this marriage Nanasaheb Peshwa died. When Nana Phadnavis died at the age of 67, his wife Jijabai was only 9 years old². All the above examples shows that how girls were becoming widows at an early age during the Peshwa period.

In the Peshwa period, the practice of Sati was prevalent in Maharashtra. A wife immolating herself either on the funeral pyre of her dead husband or in some other fashion soon after his death. Although never widely practiced, Sati was the ideal of womanly devotion held by certain Brahman and royal castes. In the Peshwa family, Annapurnabai, the second wife of Chimaji Appa, the brother of the first Bajirao and Ramabai, the wife of the First Madhavrao, both had committed Sati on their husband's funeral pyre³.

The practice of widow hair shaving (*Keshavpan*) was prevalent in Peshwa period as like the practice of Sati. However, the practice of hair shaving (*Keshavpan*) was not common in all communities like Sati. In the Brahmin caste, the practice of hair shaving was strictly followed. In it the wife's hair was cremated along with her husband's dead body⁴.

Although the practice of sati and widow hair shaving (*Keshavpan*) was practiced in the Peshwa period, there are numerous examples of widow marriage or remarriage found in non-Brahmin communities. There were two types of widow remarriages, *Path* and *Muhurat*. In *Path* marriage or remarriage, women leave their first husband and remarry to other men for various reasons such as, abandoned by their husbands, divorced by their husbands, their husbands leaving from home, divorcing their husbands. This means that the woman is not necessarily a widow at the time of *path* marriage. In *Muhurat* marriage or remarriage, after the death of the husband, the wife marries another husband. In short, at the time of *Muhurat* marriage, the woman was a widow. When Patil of Mouje Bahuli abandoned his wife Jani, Jani waited for her husband about ten-twelve years, then applied to the government and got married to Gondaji Gaikwad for the second time. Dhondaji Mali had gone abroad. He did not return for many years. So Dhondaji's wife remarried to Nimbaji. Due to the leave home of the husband, the women who remarried would stay in the house of the second husband, even if the first husband returned. Like the *Path* remarriages, many examples of the *Muhurat* widow remarriages are found in Peshwa documents. Although the widow had children from first husband, the widow had no problem to remarriage. Because the second husband would accept the children of the first husband after marriage⁵.

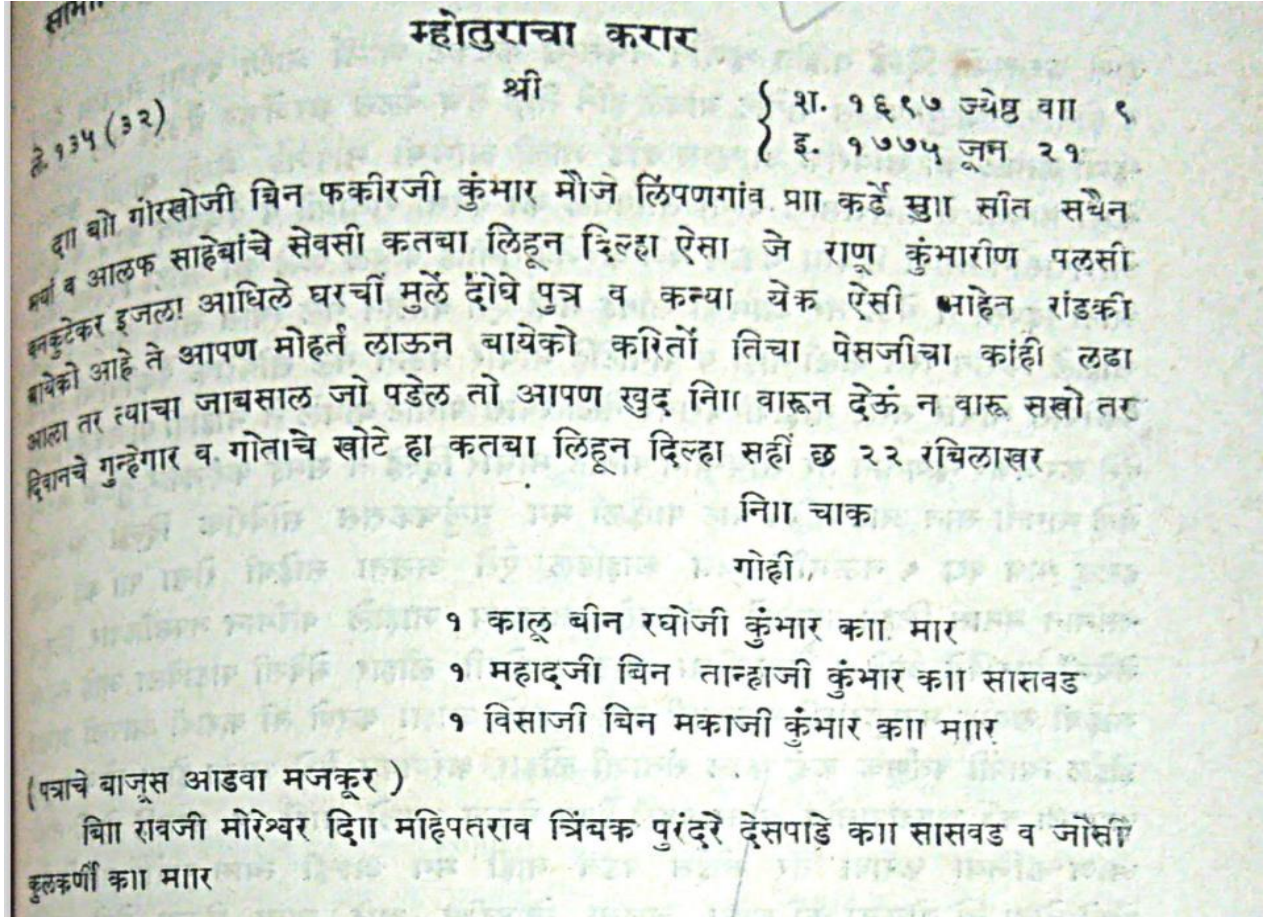
A Few Widow Remarriage Agreements of Medieval Maharashtra:

In 1950, the Bharat Itihas Sanshodhan Mandal of Pune published a Marathi book entitled "*Peshawe-Kalin Samajik va Aarthik Pratravyavahar (E.S.1722 Te E.S. 1854)*" ("Social and Economic Correspondence of the Peshwa Period -1722 to 1854). Some important

authentic letters on social and economic affairs of 1722 to 1854 have been published in this book.

The book was edited by Rajaram Vinayak Oturkar, a well-known professor of history at the

1. Letter No. 1 :



Letter taken from “Peshawe-Kalin Samajik va Aarthik Pratravyavahar (E.S.1722 Te E.S. 1854)” (“Social and Economic Correspondence of the Peshwa Period -1722 to 1854), edited by Rajaram Vinayak Oturkar

Important things in the Above Widow Remarriage Agreement (Mhotura Karar):

The above widow remarriage agreement is dated 21st June, 1775 and it is clearly written in the middle of the beginning of this agreement as ‘Mhoturacha Karar’(widow remarriage agreement). That is to say, the agreement is for widow remarriage. The agreement was undertaken by Gorkhoji bin Fakirji Kumbhar of Mauje Limpangaon in the then Karde province, in

then Sir Parashurambhau College. These letters give very important information about the then widow remarriage.

which he said that he has been marrying to Ranu Kumbharin, a widow, despite having two sons and a daughter from her first husband. Gorkhiji has also agreed in the agreement of that if Ranu Kumbharini's claim of Pesji arises after this marriage, he will bear all the expenses ourselves. At the end of the agreement, he has signed and his signature was symbol of his own business that is wheel of potter. Also name of three witnesses found in this widow remarriage agreement⁶. From the above Mhotur agreement (widow's remarriage agreement), it seems that widow remarriage was taking place in the Kumbhar community (One of the non-Brahmin communities) the during Peshwa period. Not only that, even if the widow had children from her first husband, she would remarry and the second husband of the widow

would accept the children of her first husband. It is also clear from the above widow's remarriage agreement that if any financial problems arising

after this widow's remarriage, the widow's second husband would pay all the damages.

2. Letter No. 2:

पहिला नवरा परागंदा म्हणून म्होतूर

ले. १३३ (१९०) श्री { श. १६९५ श्रावण शु. ५
इ. १७७३ जुलै २४

दाा बाो कमाल वलद आजमेरी बागवान वस्ती पुणे पेठ आईतवार सुगा आर्वा सबैन मया व आलफ कारणे—साहेबाचे सेवेसी कतबा लेहून दिलहा ऐसा जे शामी आपली लेक हसन वलद परिमहंमद बागवान रांजणगाव दुधना नंदीचे काठचे यास दिलही होती ते उभयेता येका जागा नांदली कांही दिवस होऊन त्याचे पोटचे मूल येक जाले होते त्याउपरी हसन मार गिलच्याच्या लस्करास गेला त्यास दाहा बारा वर्षे जाहाली फिरोन सुख समाच्यार अद्यापवर नाही शामी पोर आदर्पराई बायेको तरूपण तिचे आंगी आहे सबच छेटू वलद भिका बागवान वस्ती को सासवड यासी मोहतूर निका लाऊन देतो खुशरजावंदी शामीची व आपणासहि पोटचे पोरिचे दुख देखवेना म्हणून निका लाऊन दिलही असे कालकला हसन वलद परिमहंमद बागवान आला तर छटू वलद भिका बागवान यांसी कांही बोलावयासी वाद सांगावयासी समंध नाही याबाचे शामीचा वरीसदार आपण तिचा बाप आहे आम्हांसी वाद सांगेल तर त्यास दुसरी बायेको करून देऊं तिचा वारिसा आपण पुरऊन देऊं न देऊं तर गोताचे खोटे व दिवानचे गुन्हेगार हा कतबा लेहून दिलहा सही छ ३ माहे जमादिलोवल निगा तागडी (तागडी तराजसह चिन्ह)

सामाजी

जानोजी बीन लालमण परदेसी द्याा राजश्री बगाजी साबाजी निगा जिल्हेदार को मजकूर

परिसान वलद करीमखान सिकलकर वस्ती को मार

श्रीही

सेख निजामवलद राजे महंमद मुलाणे को मार

सुभानजी वलद काळू बागवान

सामुला वलद फकीर महंमद बागवान

राजूवलद शाहाभाइ बागवान

नथूवलद जानमहंमद बागवान

मदारखान वलद राहानखान पहिले पखाळीवर होते हली वस्ती को मार

(पत्राचे बाजूस आडवा मजकूर)

बीगा रावजी मोरेश्वर निगा राजश्री महिपतराव त्रिंबक पुरंधरे देसपांडे काा सासवड व जोसी कुलकर्णी को मजकूर

Letter taken from “Peshawe-Kalin Samajik va Aarthik Pratravyavahar (E.S.1722 Te E.S. 1854)” (“Social and Economic Correspondence of the Peshwa Period -1722 to 1854), edited by Rajaram Vinayak Oturkar

Important things in the Above Widow Remarriage Agreement (Mhotura Karar):

The above widow remarriage agreement is dated 24th July, 1773 and it is clearly written in the middle of the beginning of this agreement as ‘Pahila Navara Paraganda mhnun mhotura’

(remarriage due to long absence of first husband). The agreement was undertaken by Kamal Valad Ajmeri Bagwan of Raviwar Peth, Pune. In it, he said that his daughter was married to Hasan Valad Parimohammad Bagwan of Ranjangaon and they had a son. It has been ten or twelve years since Hassan went to the military mission, but we have not been heard about his alive. Therefore, since he could not bear the pain of his young daughter, he is giving the hands of his daughter to hand of Bhika Bagwan from Saswad. If my daughter's first husband Hassan comes after this marriage, he will have nothing to do arguing with my daughter's second husband. Kamal, who wrote the agreement, has also agreed to do Hassan's marriage to another girl. At the end of the agreement, he has signed and his signature was symbol of his own business that is Scales (a tool for weighing goods). The agreement names a total of nine witnesses⁷.

The above *Mhotur* agreement (widow's remarriage agreement) shows that during the Peshwa period, widow remarriage was also taking place in the Muslim community of Maharashtra, especially for women whose husbands leaving from home.

Conclusion:

The Colonial historians, while writing the history of medieval India, have referred to the medieval period as the Dark Ages of India. There was no progress in any field in India during the medieval period. Also, during this period many bad customs were prevalent in India. Among the women there were bad habits like child marriage, Heterogeneous marriages (Virgin-old male marriage), polygamy, *Sati*, widow hair shaving (*Keshavpan*). Moreover, colonial historians have generalized that in medieval India, widows were not allowed to marry and that widows had to endure a very miserable life. The colonial historians seem to have generalized when

describing the condition of women in medieval Maharashtra. Colonial historians have applied the bad practices of women in certain communities to the whole society of that time.

In non-Brahmin communities in medieval Maharashtra, such practices as *Sati* and *Widow Keshavpan* should not be so prevalent because if such practices were prevalent in non-Brahmin communities, many examples of widow remarriage would not have been found in medieval documents. From the two widow remarriage agreements (*Mhotura Karar*) of Peshwa period given in this research paper, it is evident that in the medieval period, widow remarriage was taking place in non-Brahmin communities. Not only that, even if the widow had children from her first husband, she would remarry and the second husband of the widow would accept the children of her first husband. Also, if a remarriage of widow caused financial problems, the widow's second husband would pay all the damages. In addition, the above-mentioned agreement shows that women whose husbands went abroad for war, trade or any other reasons and did not return, were remarrying. But women whose husbands leaving from home or divorced their wives had to wait ten to twelve years before they could remarry. In short, the generalized conclusions drawn by colonial historians on the condition of widows in medieval India cannot be accepted.

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