

## **Socio-Economic Dimensions of the Custom of Karewa: A Case Study of Haryana State**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In the agrarian milieu of the Haryana region the socio-cultural ethos were determined by the land owning classes especially by the Jats which emerged as the dominant caste in social, economic and numerical terms. The domination by a single caste set the tone and shaped the custom of levirate marriages was followed by other agriculturists' castes except the Rajputs in Haryana. The underlying logic of retaining the widow within the family ranging from control of her property, labour, her sexuality and reproductive capacity, to control of her options regarding marriage partners. The specific socio-economic conditions of the region due to famine and drought like conditions the out migration of men in search of work and large scale recruitment to the British Indian Army underlined the importance of women for the productive and reproductive role and acceptance of liberal attitude towards widow remarriage. Keeping in view the different socio-economic factors of the region, the present study in an attempt to explore various dimensions of the widow remarriage in Haryana which is called Karewa in the present context. The paper analysis the reasons of Karewa, its acceptability, impact of Karewa on life of a woman through gender perspective. Efforts have also been made to understand status of the women who are bound to accept Karewa as a social stigma which is influenced by the patriarchal structure of the society. The study is both qualitative and quantitative in nature.*

**Key Words:** Widow Remarriage, Karewa, Traditional values, Social death, Patriarchy.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In Indian society, involvement in social roles, social relationships and support system is not determined by choice or through life events but by family, caste and social norms. So a widow's life is also dependent upon her in laws, her parents, relatives and the societal norms which are applicable to that particular community. From the evidence of the classical texts, it is clear that the upper caste Hindu widow was an anomaly in traditional Hindu society since she had no place and no function in the social order, widowhood among the upper castes is a state of social death. The widowhood is perceived as a disrupter of social order and a potential violation of the moral order. A widow's social death stems from her alienation from reproduction and sexuality following the loss of her husband and her exclusion from the functioning social unit of the family. Once a woman ceases to be a wife she ceases to be a person. The widow's institutionalized marginality, a liminal state between being physically alive and being socially dead was the ultimate cultural outcome of the deprivation of the widow of her sexuality as well

as of her personhood. To incorporate women into the social system it has been suggested to constitute a separate community of widow such as that of female ascetics or to retain her in society and institutionalize her marginality. Another option for a widow was to burn herself at the funeral pyre of the husband, although this practice was not widespread and was confined to certain pockets of India.

The most formidable problem that a widow faces in traditional culture is a set of customs and practices that society has imposed on her and that divested her of all her social roles. Such as she is deprived to wear all colourful dress and jewellery, denied her all tasty and spicy food and she is not allowed to be present in festivals and religious functions. In extreme cases she is also required to tonsure her hair. They were desired to donate the rest of their life in prayer and fasting.

According to Uma Chakravarti, the reasons for all these restrictions was the fear that the sexuality of the young widow was a threat to the entire society. Hence she had to be 'neutered' and 'unsexed'. (Young widows were considered sexually dangerous and earned the potential to disrupt, pollute and desecrate the dead husband's lineage and hence she had to be emasculated of all her sexuality).

A fear of female sexuality and therefore the need to control it have been felt in many societies and civilization. In colonial Haryana, the custom of widow remarriage emerged as one of the most effective and socially valid forms of this control. Widow remarriage, as followed in this region, had special features of its own known as Karewa, Karao or Chaddarandazi, the custom is traceable to the old Rig Vedic viyog (levirate marriage) which was prevalent in the geographical region of Punjab-Haryana and associated with the early Vedic Aryana settlement. Karewa, a white sheet with coloured corners, was thrown by the man over the widow's head, signifying his acceptance of her as his wife. Symbolically, this gesture brought the widow once again under male protection by her being given his shelter or roof and with it receiving colours in life. With his gesture the widow who had become relatively autonomous was again subordinated. This custom represented social consent for cohabitation. In this kind of levirate marriage or Karewa the widow as accepted as wife by one of the younger brothers of the deceased husband, failing him the husband's elder brother, failing him his agnatic first cousin and so on.

In the agrarian milieu of the Haryana region the socio-cultural ethos were determined by the land owning classes especially the Jats which emerged as the dominant caste in social, economic and numerical terms. The domination by a single caste set the tone and shaped the custom of levirate marriages was followed by other agriculturists' castes except the Rajputs in Haryana.

The underlying logic of retaining the widow within the family ranging from control of her property, labour, her sexuality and reproductive capacity, to control of her options regarding marriage partners.

Generally forced levirate marriage of the peasant culture successfully kept the landed property intact in the family and in the patrilineal clan. This kind of accommodative patriarchy however is repressive from a widow's point of view, but highlight the importance of women for the agrarian economy both in its productive and reproductive aspects.

## METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study is both qualitative and quantitative in nature.

### OBJECTIVES:

The specific socio-economic conditions of the region due to famine and drought like conditions the out migration of men in search of work and large scale recruitment to the British Indian Army underlined the importance of women for the productive and reproductive role and acceptance of liberal attitude towards widow remarriage. Keeping in view the different socio-economic factors of the region the present study in an attempt to explore various dimensions of the form of widow remarriage in Haryana which is called Karewa in the present context. The paper analysis the reasons of Karewa, its acceptability, impact of Karewa on life of a woman through gender perspective. Efforts have also been made to understand the status of the women who had accepted Karewa and the patriarchal structure of the society behind this custom.

### Sample of the Study

Purposive sampling method was used to collect the data. The unit of the study was women who accepted Karewa after the death of their husbands. It was quite difficult to find out such women who accepted Karewa therefore a number of known persons who are residents of Haryana were contacted and asked to give information about such women in their surroundings. In this way a total of 25 women were interviewed in 7 districts of Haryana namely Kurukshetra, Panipat, Rohtak, Jhajjar, Kaithal, Jind and Karnal.

### Data Collection

An unstructured questionnaire was designed for the purpose of data collection which was earlier pilot tested and modified accordingly. A team of two researchers personally visited the urban or the rural areas of the above mentioned seven districts of Haryana and collected relevant information with the help of case study and observation method. During the interactions with the respondents group discussions were also held with the respondents group discussions were also held with the family members of the respondents like mother in law, parents of the women or sometimes with the husbands. The findings of the study are as follows:

### Findings

#### Personal detail of the Respondents

Out of the total sample of 25 women who accepted Karewa 24 percent were illiterate and the same 24 percent were educated up to middle level. 8 percent of the respondents were even graduate and the rest were either matriculate or educated up to Senior Secondary level. It was found that majority of these women i.e. 32 percent belonged to the Jat community, besides this 16 percent belonged to Kashyap Rajput, 12 percent were Brahmins and others belonged to other backward or scheduled castes. Most of the respondents were either housewives or were petty agricultural labourers or doing stitching work at home. Only 16% of the respondents were involved in any government job like JBT teacher, Anganwadi worker or library assistant in the library of the university. 56 percent of the respondents got married between the age of 18 to 20 years while 36% of them got married when they were below 18 years. Further husbands of 60%

of the respondents had died when they were between 21-25 years of age whereas 24% respondents were such who got widow between the age of 16-20 years. It was also seen that 80% of them were having children when they got widow.

It was informed by 60% of the respondents that Karewa was practiced on them between one to six months after the death of their husbands. Even two of them said that it was enforced on them on the thirteenth day of the death of their husbands. It was seen during the survey that in 92% of the cases Karewa was conducted with the younger brother of the deceased husband whereas in rest of the cases it was performed with already married elder brother of the husband since there was no younger brother.

In most of the cases there was no matching in the age of the respondents with whom then Karewa was performed. In some of the cases the man was 10 to 22 years older and in some cases it was younger to the women. In one case the husband was eight years younger to the woman. It was also noticed that almost all of them gave birth to a child after Karewa to fulfill the wishes of the in-law's family. In addition this it was observed that matching between the couple with regard to education was not a consideration and most of them belonged to well to do families, only a few belonged to labourerclass families.

### **Status of a Widow in Our Society**

The death of a woman's husband marks the transition from wife to widow taking the woman from a central place in the family to its margin and she is regarded as someone who is physically alive but socially dead. The widow's marginal state means that she is the object of divine and social disfavor. Widowhood is perceived as a disrupter of social order and a prescribed behavior which she has to follow. Outside of the husband, the wife has no recognized existence. The plight of a widow is miserable since it carries with it problems of insufficiency of money, unemployment and strained social relations with both natal and nuptial families along with cultural seclusion. All these reasons forced the respondents to accept Karewa. During the interaction they said that since they were very young, so found it very challenging to lead entire life with social seclusion. They cursed their fate which had brought them all the misfortune. At this point of time a woman thinks herself inauspicious and isolates herself from all the celebrations and rituals. Besides the family members and members from the community remind them of their ill fate and call them as helpless- 'Abhagin'. They said that nobody comes forward to help a widow, even the parents at one time see them as an economic burden. If she has a child then the burden of rearing him/her lies solely on her. Most of the respondents added that it is quite difficult for a widow to get married in some other family since everyone considers them inauspicious (they would bring ill to the family like in the family where they were married) and no one accepts them whole heartedly.

### **Attitude of the Parents**

The results of the present study reveal that however the attitude of the parents of the respondents was favourable towards them and they gave financial and emotional support to them, but they were in favour of second marriage or Karewa of their daughters. They said that the actual family of a woman is of her in-law's family, "Beti to Raja Maharaja kibhipeeharmeinnadati". Some of the parents of the respondents were willing to perform Karewa while some were not since they that their daughter was very young having no children and she could be married away in some

other family, but the in-law's family called the community panchayat which pressurize them to perform Karewa. The girl does not have a say in this matter.

### **Attitude of In-Law's Family**

The study reveals that more than 75% of the respondents said that after the death of their husbands the behavior and attitude of the members of their in-law's family was favourable towards them. They did not consider their daughter-in-law responsible for the death of their son. But in rest of the cases the in-law's family did not show favourable attitude rather they consider them inauspicious although they were ready to accept her again as a wife of their another son due to varied reasons. Some of the cases studies very well interrupt the reasons of this favourable attitude:

- In one case study Rajbala (name changed) was forced to accept Karewa with the elder brother of her husband who was 22 years elder to her, married and having children. The reason being they did not want to loose a house and some land which was in the name of her husband and after the death of her husband it would automatically transfer to her and her daughter's name.
- Reena (name changed) had to accept Karewa with the younger brother of her husband due to the social pressure. She informed that there was 10 acres of land in the name of her husband and she was having two sons. Her in-law's family thought if she leaves home then only they would loose the land, but also the inheritors i.e. her two sons. So they thought of performing Karewa and kept the land and the successors intact.
- In one case Seema (name changed) started receiving benefits from the Army since her husband was a Kargil martyr. This was not liked by her in-law's, so they thought to perform her Karewa with the younger brother of her husband so that they could also be a part of the financial benefits she was receiving.
- Another case study of Lali Devi reveals that her in-law's family pressurized her for accepting Karewa with the younger brother of her husband since they were unable to find a bride for him due to various socio-economic reasons.

### **Role of Property**

It was observed during the interaction with the participants that the underlying reason of practicing Karewa was not that the family of the husband was concerned with the future of the widow and her children rather their own hidden benefits. The respondents said that the elderly people of the community as well as some influential people of the community panchayat decide the matter of Karewa keeping in view the interests of the family where the widow has no role to play except accepting it.

If we look at all the 25 case studies altogether then the role of property and control over women's labour appeared to be the major reasons. The respondents who belonged to higher class of Jat community accepted that due to the fear of distribution of the property they practiced Karewa. While the respondents belonging to lower castes accepted some other socio-economic reasons. They said that after the death of the husband a woman becomes financially insecure. She does not have any means of survival. In addition to that a woman is also a part of the family labour

in lower castes. Thus the family does not want to loose an earning hand and the woman gets support of the family to live in.

However among the cases of widows of martyrs economic benefits seemed to be the major reasons behind practicing Karewa.

### Social Attitude

There are several marginalizing factors which keep the widow away from the mainstream of social life. They still suffer from social ostracism of one kind or another, some of them overt but many of them covert. In several areas of life society is not so kind to a widow as it is to a non-widow. The death of the husband marks a dramatic shift in the perception of the community towards the widow. She becomes an object of real moral panic. They are feared and hated. They are feared of their sexuality and their right to inherit property. Thus the society wants to control her sexuality and deny her any property or inheritance that is due to her by practicing Karewa. Thus these forced levirate marriages of the peasant culture successfully keep the landed property intact in the family and in the patrilineal clan. The respondents were of the view that the society cannot let a woman to live free and independently, they try to control her on the pretext of various socio-cultural norms. The family has to abide by the cultural norms of the society hence the woman keeps silence whether the issue relates to her or not and expresses her inability to resist. This social attitude keeps the women away from any decision making process.

### Respondents Experiences

The respondents also shared their viewpoint towards Karewa, reasons for accepting it and their adjustment in the family from a different perspective. Most of the respondents were in favour of Karewa. These women generally belonged to lower socio-economic status or were already having children. They said that after the death of the husband there was no one to support them financially except their parents and they did not want to be a burden on their parental family. So lack of financial independence and poverty was one of the major reasons. They added that if they had married in some other family, they had to leave their children behind because the new family might not accept her with children or might not care for them properly. One of the benefits they felt of accepting Karewa was that their children would be reared in the same family with almost similar affection.

However some of the respondents expressed their opposition to this custom. They said that before practicing Karewa at least some matching whether it is age, educational or mental status should be taken into consideration. If there is a big difference between age or mental makeup of the couple, then it leads to conflict between them.

Anita (name changed) during the interaction said that the consent of the brother of the deceased husband should also be considered, otherwise such relations become burden on him. In her case her brother-in-law did not want to do Karewa with her but he could not resist in view of a prevalent or normal practice and now he is involved in extra marital affair and rarely comes home, however he bears all the expenses of herself and her children. Thus their relation is only for name sake.

Further sharing their experiences most of the respondents said in our society a woman always remains under the control of a man whether he is father, husband or a son. In the absence of a

male in life the society makes her feel helpless. Sometimes they try to take undue advantage of this situation and harass her sexually. If a woman is financially secure and wants to lead her life alone, the society does not let her do so, hence they felt that it is better to follow suit and accept the custom silently. Thus the traditional and stereotyped ideology or our society is responsible for continuation in such practice context.

Some of the respondents who were war widows said that since there was no financial constraints on them to rear their children as they were getting their husband's pension and other benefits in one case the government sanctioned her license of a gas agency, but they had to accept Karewa due to the pressure improved on them by the family members and the society on the pretext to secure their sexuality and importance of support of a male member in woman's life. They believed that the actual reason behind practicing this custom was to get control once the financial benefits, her share in her husband's property and on her sexuality.

In this way they felt that on the one hand this practice provides a woman and her children financial and emotional support which was lacking due to the death of the husband and the society gets hold on her assets, property and upon herself on the other, thereby she again goes under the control of male domination.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The death of a woman's husband marks the transition from wife to widow taking the woman from a central piece in the family to its margin, henceforth she is regarded as someone who is physically alive but socially dead. Several stereotypes persist about widows in India. In some communities widow remarriage is prohibited while in others it is widely practiced. Certain regions practice leviratic unions, Haryana is among one of them. In regions or social groups where the demand for women's labour and fertility is high, such as in Haryana during the colonial period when large scale migration of men in search of job and mass recruitment in Army created shortage of men in the region, the remarriage of widows through levirate was encouraged as a means of controlling their productive labour as well as their fertility and their property. This custom is being constantly followed in Haryana by almost all the castes as a common practice. PremChawdhry says "customary law or customs are constantly being shaped, challenged and reshaped by patriarchy to fit the particular needs of a community: by what she calls an accommodative patriarchy."

In Haryana a woman had come to be recognized and coveted as an economic necessity, but only as a part of a man's property. Work wise she provided labour for the peasant household, as well as cultivation and animal husbandry, while all the time operating inside the male dominated norms which took for granted women's extreme labour without affording her any freedom. The social attitude kept the women away from any decision making process.

However the respondents showed compliance to the customary practice, some opposition was also noticeable but they were forced to accept it in order to escape from the charges of unchastity and to regain economic support for themselves and their children. They felt that these kind of forced union often lead to conflicts in the marital life especially when there is a big gap between the age and the mental maturity of the couple. They considered it as a kind of living arrangement. The acceptance of this practice showed the desire of widows to control and assert

their relative autonomy, both economic and sexual, taking precedence over the social acceptability of their remarried status.

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