



Depiction of Widowhood in Bengali Films with a special emphasis on *Sati*, *Chokher Bali*, and *Swet Patharer Thala*

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Abstract

Drawn on three Bengali films the paper tries to reflect on the role of films in depiction of social issues. 'Widowhood' which is a specific social construct in Indian society is taken as the basis of analysis with three Bengali films Sati, Chokher Bali and Swet Patharer Thala. The paper shows how widowhood got important treatment in different time period in Indian films mainly Bengali films.

Keywords: Widow, social construction, films, *Chokher Bali*, *Sati*, *Swet Patharer Thala*.

Introduction

Film has been one of the important media of mass communication played very important role in communicating crucial message to the society, be it economic, political or social. While there are various movies that are based on story of veneration to God, love, war etc, there are many movies which dealt with the harsh realities of life of social being. Widowhood as a serious problem in Indian Hindu society has received considerable attention of the film makers. A good number of films have raised the issue of sufferings in its different parts. There are again a number of movies which highly dealt with the problem of widows in India. A sociological analysis of these films is very much required to have an understanding of the issue further and to assess how the film could be successful in dealing with the issue. Bengali films are taken for specific analysis as it is found that there is no comparison of Bengali films with other films in so far as the concern for widowhood is analyzed. There are of course obvious reasons behind this too. First, number of Bengali widows more in West Bengal than any other states in terms of women aged above 50¹. Bengali society experienced more instances of widowhood in comparison to other. While in the past Bengali society was known for the practice of kulinism² where a higher caste Brahmin was the only preferable groom to whom one can aspire to marry his or her daughter off. As marriage of a girl with a higher caste Brahmin was a matter of pride to other lowly stood Brahmin family. This resulted in the polygyny where a man marries to a number of women of different age, some of whom even happen to be child. The wide prevalence of child widows can be a major reason for such practice of kulinism. The wide age gap between husband and wife seem one of the major causes of high percentage of widows to total female population in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal, etc even now³. Whatever may be the reason, the increased number of widows in Bengali society and the stringent code prescribed for Bengali widow makes it more important to attract the attention of novelists and film makers.

Hence a study of Bengali films is made on this paper to understand the problem of widowhood and its portrayal in Bengali films

Widowhood and its social construction in Indian society

Widow as a specific gender construct in Indian Hindu society carries different or a specific meaning in comparison to the rest of the women community of the world. Not only is it a social construct but a construct that carries all negative connotations. Though literally widow means a woman whose husband is dead, in Hindu societal context it means much more things than this simple literal meaning. The term carries with it all sufferings and deprivations. For a Hindu widow there is a specific code of conduct prescribed by the society. After the death of the husband the bereaved wife has to abandon her all earthly desires as taking delicious food, wearing colorful and gorgeous *sarees*, sleeping in soft mattress and abstaining from sex that is through marriage. The only path to lead life is through sacrifice and almighty. Many sociologists have opined that the death of husband causes social death of a woman⁴. It is maintained that once women ceases to be a wife she very often ceases to be a person. Her personhood is thus defined by her male counterpart. Most of the sociologists have taken a feministic stand and considered widowhood as a construct again in a patriarchal set up. To Martha Chen the main purpose of widowhood is to control women through the institution of marriage⁵.

Widow is generally a permanent status once one becomes a widow, be it a young woman or old. But the same is not the case with widower. Generally, being widower is not a stigma to society. A widower is not barred from continuing any of the habits he used to enjoy before the death of his wife. Thus the percentage of widower to total male population is very meager in comparison to widows and their proportion to female population. But vice versa is not the case with a widow. The

plight of suttee or sati is known to the world, the ritual death of wife of the deceased husband which is banned years ago. While people realize the injustice to suttees, the injustice to widows is yet to be realized.

A widow suffers from double deprivations for her dual status as women and widow. A woman with white *saree* is the symbol of all deprivations. Neither she is neither encouraged to marry nor is a man encouraged to marry a widow. Whenever such incident goes to materialize there are different type of pressures from various sides. Though widow remarriage Act legally removed all barriers all hurdles, but the social mindset is yet to change. The very horror of inability to marry makes her disabled in other spheres of life. She has to abandon all earthly desires because she is handicapped to avail these in her rest part of life. The very ineligibility to remarry makes her to refrain from using all those apparels and cosmetics which a married women is used to do. The most important is that she is debarred from use of vermilion which is marker of married woman.

The differential experiences of women and men losing their respective spouse are reflected in the writing of Marty Chen and Jean Dreze⁶ where women are shown as more sufferer than men.

Widowhood reflected in Indian films

Widowhood as harsh reality of Indian social life very often occupies an important place in Indian cinemas to focus on women's deprivation. Widow as disadvantaged category very often appears in different films as part of many films. A widow is shown to be tortured sometimes by putting vermilion on her forehead by villain character as is shown in the film *Anari*. The lack of right to property or removal of widows from the property of her husband by the in-laws after the death of her husband is very often shown as part of many films. Example of this can be given of film *Warish*. A good number of films have been produced highly based on the theme of deprivations of widows and their sufferings. Here mention can be made of *Prem Rog*, *Water*, *Dor* etc. These films have shown in detail the sufferings of widows and the stigma of widowhood in diverse ways.

It seems it is in 1982 widowhood got a maximum treatment, this is mainly observed in the film *Prem Rog* directed by Raj Kapoor. The film starts with an introduction of love affair of a widow with a poor village man. The society being aware of the fact, starts torturing the couple asking them to stop the affair unless they will be punished by the members of the society. The entry of Sammy Kapoor and his acceptance of the love affair followed by their marriage introduces the very objective of the film. The hero Devdhar (Rishi Kapoor) who is an educated young man also supports the marriage. This makes both Sammy Kapoor and Rishi Kapoor to come close to each other where they discover the connection that lied between Devdhar and Sammy Kapoor. As Devdhar is the son of the purohit of Sammy

Kapoor, the powerful Thakur of the village, Devdhar visits Sammy Kapoor's house now and then. The story got a climax when Sammy Kapoor's niece (younger brother's daughter) was married to another powerful and handsome Thakur and her husband dies on the very day of her marriage. Her ill treatment and rape by her elder brother in-law made her sister in law to hand over Manorama to her parental family. Strangely enough the much pampered child of Thakur family had to go through a completely alien type of treatment from her near and dear ones in her natal house. She was made to stay in a different type of house which was abandoned for family use. She was made to sleep on a caught with minimum things spread over it. She was served very simple food. The plight of widowhood was neatly presented through various meetings of Manorama with Devdhar who happened to be the childhood friend of Manorama and also the brother of her close friend. Devdhar gradually had fallen in love but due to his low standing in society he could never express her love. When Devdhar saw Manorama was served very simple food as she is a widow and Devdhar was served a complete dish full of sumptuous items Devdhar could not accept. The film concluded with a happy ending of marriage between Devdhar and Manorama.

In 1993 another film *Rudali* was produced where the main focus was a widow who was left with her mentally challenged son. Though the film was not raising the widow question, it also gives a perspective of the suffering of an woman with her lonely child in the absence of her husband

The widowhood in *Water*, the element trilogy of Deepa Mehta draws highly on the widows in Varanasi and was set in a ashram in Varanasi. The film shows the life of widows in 1938, mainly the late 1930s. Though the production is a Canadian one, the film was based on Indian society directed by an Indian. The film juxtaposes the condition of different widows at the *asram* who are of different age and nature. The three main widow characters Sakuntala, Kalyani and the youngest who is seven years old, show light on three aspects of widowhood. Sakuntala is a witty and sharp devout widow who is critical of widowhood as a practice. Kalyani who is also young represents widows who are engaged in other purposes quite unknown by many i.e., prostitution. Chuiya which is a child widow shows the practice of child marriage and frequent occurrence of child becoming widow. The child widow reflects another dimension that how cruel the practice is that it even keeps the young girl away from the taste of life. Chuiya and other widows are abandoned by their family member because many families are not ready to bear the burden of one woman, also because in ashram they can lead a better life of sacrifice.

But the life in ashram shows a different story of plight of widows which even does not spare Chuiya when she was made into flesh trade forcefully in the absence of Kalyani (Lisa Ray) when the later denounced the flesh trade and dreamt for brighter future with Narayana (John Abraham), a young upper class

charming man who was inspired by the idea of Gandhism and followed it.

The widowhood is also reflected well in a different way in the film *Dor* released in 2006. Though *Dor* even did not base on widow perspective solely, it shows how a newly married bride had to abandon her colorful dresses which added to her beauty and to wear black attire which is meant for widows in Rajasthan. It also shows how colorful life of Meera (Ayesha Takia) turned into a black and white portrait where she is seen as a part of the portrait which does not move or does not have any mobility. The life becomes standstill once she lost her husband.

Depiction of widowhood in *Chokher Bali*, *Sati* and *Swet Patharer Thala*

Sati: The film *sati* is directed by Aparna Sen, the veteran Bengali film artist turned director. The film is based on the issue of superstitious belief where a mute orphan girl is married to a banyan tree as her horoscope suggests that she will be a *sati* as her husband would die after marriage. The film reflects on the horror of becoming *sati*. As is known, the custom of *sati* was that the widow of the deceased husband had to burn herself alive or forced to be burnt in the funeral pyre of the dead husband. This is the way how a Hindu woman achieves chastity or becomes *Sati*. The women who do not do so cannot become *sati*. So very often if one woman does not want to burn herself in the pyre she is forcefully thrown into the fire considering her existence will bring misfortune to the society. The film is thus base on the theme of how a Bengali society like the other Hindu societies was full of irrationalism in the name of superstition. Since the horoscope suggests she will become *sati*, so the family members of the girl thought that if she is married to a banyan tree then her chance of becoming *sati* will not be there as all those effect of horoscope will be fallen on banyan tree and as a result she would not require becoming a *sati*.

Chokher Bali: Film *Chokher Bali* is based on the conflict of western ideology and Indian ideology centered on widowhood. It is also about a woman who rebels against the age old practice of widowhood and objects to follow the set of code of conduct for widow.

Generally a widow is not permitted to have varieties of food. At the beginning of the film Binodini, a widow, is given a chocolate by the nun as it is the most favorite of Binodini. Binodini did not hesitate to take it though one widow has to abandon all these foreign made food items for her consumption as the purity dimension of the food can be a question. The taking of chocolate marks the denial of stricture on food. Throughout the film, the character Binodini who is exposed to western ideology disagrees to go by the institution of widowhood. Neither she wants to abandon the food habits nor any other earthly requirements of a human body and mind for her widowhood. Her resentment is observed when she asks

Lakshmi, Mahendra's mother to take tea when the later find it a sin to take tea, a foreign drink. It can be said the plot was selected to reflect on the conception of widow remarriage in Indian society. In a soil of India anything foreign was considered as inauspicious for society even the English learning which came out in the words of Ashalata according to whom English learning has brought all misfortune for her. The film also reflects how even the nationalist ideology and the liberationist ideology also does not bring up the agenda of women to liberate from age old practice of widowhood. This is shown when Binodini expressed her love for Bihari and begged to him to marry her.

Thus *Chokher Bali* focuses on the widows who also are human being with flesh and blood. She has both the requirement for body one which is food and the other which is sexual gratification. Besides, it also talks about the social need to be safe and to live with uplifted status. This came out in the words of Binodini –'I have three identities - first, I am a widow, second I am a English and third I am young. In all these identities my main identity is diluted. I am also made up of flesh and blood'. Many things are shown in the film in short flashes, for example, the desire to take fish which is also very strong in some cases of widowhood. When fishes were cooked in the ashram of Kashi (Varanasi) which is meant for widows, to be served to Ashalata as she was pregnant and fish is the requirement of the body for a healthy bearing of child. One widow was only staring at the fish fry as she is barred from taking. Hence she was satisfying herself from the smell of fish fry. This shows how widows are stopped from taking non-vegetarian food despite they carry a desire for it. Again when Lakshmi was told by Binodini that taking of tea is not a sin and even sin can be washed away once you repent for it, Lakshmi did not take time to taste it which is followed by her regular taking of tea after closing the door.

Swet Patharer Thala: While *Sati* is based on the allied superstitious beliefs associated with the practice of *sati*, and *Chokher Bali* is based on the introduction of widow remarriage and its repercussions, the *Swet Patharer Thala* is based on the situation of widow in post independent scenario. The film was based on Bani Basu's Novel and directed by Prabhat Roy. The main character of the film was played by Aparna Sen. The film sets on the society of West Bengali that depicts the changing mind set in contemporary society. The film talks a about women who was a happily married house wife suddenly had to lose her husband. The immediate impact was that she had to abandon all colors from her life first, by removing vermilion and then by abandoning non vegetarian food. By any means Bandana was not finding it easy to accept all these codes and habits that a widow follows. She does not wear white *saree* because the doctor advised her not to do so as it was unbearable to the child and if she continues to do so it may have a negative impact on the mental health of her son. Thus she stops wearing white *saree* which is the dress code of Bengali widow like many other

communities. She had to go through a forced fasting which she used to find very difficult.

The film shows how a widow has to go through differential experience in different stages of life house after the death of her husband. While she used to receive lot of care and love from her in-laws, the death of her husband brought an ugly side of their character as they used to humiliate and oppress her which included all financial deprivations too. She was not welcome to stay with her family members as a result she had to leave the in-law house with her only children.

In the workplace she had a different experience where the colleagues used to tease her. Bandana learnt to respond to such situation sometimes in the form of avoidance sometimes with firm reply. The work place changed her in many ways. She gradually became empowered to lead life. But as human being she too became weak to the art teacher of her son who had developed feelings for Bandana. Initially Bandana was scared about how her son and thought how her son would react to such situation when he will come to know about their relation that was growing as he was growing gradually. Like other widows bandana wanted to be away from this, but gradually she looked back to her need and wanted to marry Sudipto Sarkar. *Swet Patharer Thala* shows how it is very difficult to bring change in the plight of women come what may be the case. The situation is same to all women whether educated or working.

Conclusion

A discussion on the three films brings up certain things very clearly. First of all it speaks how film can be a most important media to reflect on social issues and has the potentiality to form a public opinion. The films discussed above though are set on

diverse time frame and places, all three films depict the plight of widow especially Bengali widows. It can be said that three of the films had a feministic perspective which became popular in the decade of eighties. The Hindi film *Prem Rog* in 1882 raises the issue first loudly when the widow remarriage got maximum treatment. The three films discussed above bring up all the crucial aspects of suffering of widowhood. The fasting of widows and abandoning of sumptuous food, the abandoning of ornaments and colors , and finally the barrier to remarriage all are depicted very skill fully in the two films *Chokher Bali* and *Swet Patharer Thala*. The discussion started with *Sati* so that the horror of becoming sati can be made out first to have a good beginning. The discussion ended with *Swet Patharer Thala* which delineates the changing scenario in post colonial period.

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