Chapter V

ASCETIC WIDOWHOOD: THE BRAHMACHARYA 'SOLUTION'

Introduction

The widow problem represented, it has been argued earlier, the flip side of the patriarchal obsession with marriage and conjugal relationships. Widows derived their identities from marriage—as wives of dead men and as such they were excluded from the space and experience of conjugality. Marriage, already the key to the Hindu patriarchal family, was rendered an obsessive preoccupation—within both the new colonial legal structures and the discourses of the indigenous urban elite. Marriage ensured direct male guardianship over female sexuality and harnessed it to generational reproduction. It was increasingly being felt, however, that the conjugal sphere offered the only legitimate locus for the Hindu woman’s legal and social identity. To draw widows into a regular conjugal relationship was the primary concern of the mid-nineteenth century reformers. If widows were a ‘problem’, the solution lay in ‘remarriage’.

This, however, was a reformist solution. To their opponents, such an extension of the brahminic marriage was anathema, a threat to its power as an instrument of social control. In ‘extending’ marriage to those, who had been kept outside its pale as ‘unmarriageables’, argued the traditionalists, would weaken the mystique and power of marriage. In their arguments, control of widows’ sexuality lay in their exclusion from conjugality while commanding, at the same time, deathless devotion to the marital relationship. Marriage, they argued, was and should remain a sacrament, normatively universal and rigidly monogamous for women. They had to seek a solution other than remarriage, which would ensure the sexual containment of widows. As in many other cases this solution sought gratification in, and glorification of, a reinvented ‘tradition’, and sought to delegitimize the liberal reformist conscience. The idea of brahmacharya, coded on existing conventions and rituals of asceticism, became the alternative solution to the widow problem.
Within the agenda of cultural nationalism, thus, there was an ideological valorization of the Hindu marriage as a sacrament. The Hindu (i.e. brahminic) marriage system gained stature in contrast with both the perceived liberalization of marriage ties in the West and the relatively fluid cohabitation practices of the lower castes. The ideology of pativratya was reinvented to re-emphasize not merely a married woman’s moral standing but also to sustain the ritual status of the widow. An increasing emphasis on deathless fidelity and monogamy for women reinforced revivalist objection to remarriage.

The conceptualisation of the widow problem changed from the so-called reformist to the revivalist era. While reformers imagined widows’ sexuality as socially and morally disruptive, and sought to harness it within marriage, revivalists harped on their life-long chastity. What appeared in the reformist mind as a social malaise, requiring remedy by reform, became under cultural nationalism, an index of social and national superiority. The figure of the woman—the wife, the mother, the widow, was as crucial to nationalism as it was to the social reformers.¹ To nationalists, however, the woman of the past was valorised for her spiritual potential. Her role as a sahadharmini (partner in religious sacrifice) was elevated as heroic resisters to alien rulers, cheerfully choosing death rather than dishonour. Negating the existence of the woman in the ignominious present, she was situated in ‘the lost and glorious past’.² The refigured widow became symbolic of India’s spiritual strength and resistance against an alien culture’s invasive pressure. She came to personify unimpaired virtue and chastity—as a brahmacharini.

The shift from remarriage to brahmacharya as a solution to the widow problem marked a shift from the ‘social’ to the ‘moral’ domain. This shift was consonant with a wider transformation of the woman question. The changing relation between gender and nationalism in the late nineteenth century India has been noted by many scholars. While Partha Chatterjee and Tanika Sarkar differ on whether nationalism may have ‘resolved’ the woman question, both agree that it was in the domain of empowered femininity that Indian nationalism sought to mount a challenge against colonialism and the psycho-

physical denigration in the public domain. In the nationalist imagination, Tanika Sarkar has argued, two issues acquired overwhelming significance: first, the asexual ‘purity’ of the widow as the fulcrum of the Hindu moral order; and, second, the empowering agency of the pure widow (and/or women) as the symbol of the nation. The articulation of the patriotic project became dependent on the figure of the woman. Sarkar, however, points out, while the woman was reified to the stature of a new and supreme deity within the Hindu pantheon, she was not—could not be—a flesh-and-blood woman, ‘all too easily visible within an all-too-accountable household’. It was the reified woman who was iconised as the mother, the goddess, the Motherland and the Nation, and incorporated in the discourse of emerging nationalism. As part of this process, the widow too was extricated from questions of marriage and maintenance—concerns that were driving reformists—and reified as the upholder of the Hindu social order. Such reification was, of course, without reference to reality. However strong a moral force, brahmacharya failed to solve the problem of the widows’ sexual vulnerability. Several cases of illegitimate pregnancies and abortions of widows were brought to light in official records. Even as official and reformist documents began to highlight a clear link between widowhood and prostitution, nationalists grew more determined to uphold and protect the ‘pure’ widow from the ‘promiscuous’. To ensure their survival within the pale of respectable society any possible moral frailty of widows had to be denounced and the value of brahmacharya was reinvented as the only possible solution. Since such a resolution warred with reality, it could not be sustained without continuous renewal. As signifiers of a pure Indian cultural identity, widows had to be torn out of their specific material and social context. To reconcile with the social normal, at each stage, a new ‘resolution’ of the widow problem became necessary.

Images of Widows: The Pure, the Pathetic and the Promiscuous

Different myths of widowhood were being formulated throughout the era of reform and revivalist nationalism. With dynamic intensity and variety, multiple icons were woven

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into each other. The widow was, simultaneously, the figure of flawless purity and the image of unruly passions. The body of the widow became, at the same time, the temptation to sin and the shrine of virtue, the testing ground for Hindu superiority and the Nation’s honour.

One powerful image, which emerged from this prolix discourse, was that of the pure, pristine and spiritual widow. This mythicized icon of widow drew on various classical metaphors to codify a new relationship between the colonized nation and sacrificial femininity. In nationalist symbols of resistance against colonial rule, Mother India was repeatedly represented as a widow. In late nineteenth century Bengal, such a correlation was quite common. In 1873, the eminent protagonist of cultural nationalism, Akshaya Chandra Sarkar, introduced this notion in one of his allegorical plays, *Dasamahavidya* (Ten facets of the mother-goddess). According to Sarkar, the different stages of the Indian nation corresponded to the ten mythical aspects of the ‘mahavidya’—Kali, Tara, Soroshi, Bhubaneswari, Bhairabi, Chchinnamasta, Dhumabati, Bagala, Matangi and Kamala. Colonial India corresponded, according to him, to the seventh aspect of mother goddess, *Dhumabati*. She lacked food to nourish her body, cloth to cover herself; she represented both the plight, and the virtue of the subjugated nation.5 Sarkar bemoaned,

Mother India is now like *Dhumabati*—her hair unbraided, rough, her chariot carrying the crow. ...Widowed Bharat has no food, no clothes, she is dressed in rags, toothless.... anguish has stiffened her gaze. Displaced from every possible shelter, she has taken refuge in the broken chariot. The whole nation trembled as the mother implored, ‘Save me! I was the deity, now I have lost everything’.

The mystic glamour of *Dhumabati* lay in its power to invoke the masculine vigour of her colonized male children. The significance of the image of the frail mother was in her dynamic relationship with her male children who were to be infused with heroic enthusiasm when confronted with the mother’s plight. Thus, a direct parallel was drawn with the colonized ‘nation’ and the politically subjugated Bengali men, who had to be goaded and cajoled into resistance. In the nineteenth century re-imaging of the *Bharat Mata* as widow, argues Indira Chowdhury, widowhood was not a guise to camouflage

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5 Sarkar, *Dasamahavidya*, 100, translation mine.
6 Ibid.
A pictorial representation of Dhumabati (The seventh aspect of Dasamahavidya)

Source: Benimadhab Sealer Directory Panjika, 1411(BS), Benimadhab Seal’s Panjika Publications, Calcutta, 1410, 440.
real power but was emblematic of a pathetic state. In Kiran Chandra Bandyopadhyay’s play (*Bharat Mata*), the frail Mother-India was portrayed as a shattered and threatened widow. According to the playwright, British efforts to rescue and recover India had failed and the mother had become a widow.

Such a refiguring, however, did not remove old anxieties. Underneath the image of the immaculate widow peeped a hidden story of real ‘flesh and blood’ widows. The iconic widow was, thus, sometimes tempered by the intimate and personal image of the widow. She was the feeble, frail and famished hag. Past the age of sexual deviance, the solitary widow frequently became the vortex of family tensions. Shunted out of the family, she had to go on pilgrimages afar or was pushed at the fringe of the family. Very often, the hapless widow was left to be silenced in an uncared for death. The immortal characterisation of *Indir Thakrun* in Bibhuti Bhusan Bandyopadhyay’s *Pather Panchali* depicts the plight of one such old, lonely widow.

In stark contrast to these two images—the pure and the pathetic—stood the sexual widow. The metaphorical paeans to the widow’s ascetic body were disturbed by the frequent intrusion of the physical and sexual body of the promiscuous widow. The image of the *brahmacharini* continued to be embattled with the uncontrollable sexuality of young widows, coping with cases of infanticides and abortions by ‘licentious’ widows. Such widows, in official documents and in fictions, were portrayed as either aggressive seductresses or passive and helpless victims, and both were felt to be a threat to the Hindu moral order. The widow who lay latent in Vidyasagar’s writings assumed fuller form in the writings of the great masters: The transgressive widow appeared first as Bankim’s Rohini, then as Tagore’s Binodini and finally as Sarat Chandra’s Kiranmoyee. In popular farces, erotic plays and scandal literature, the young (*yuvati*) sexual widow, disruptive of the social order, became a staple.

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8 Kiran Chandra Bandyopadhyay, *Bharat Mata*, Calcutta, 1873, cited in Chowdhury, ibid, 100.
10 The period between 1856 and 1860 witnessed the publication of a series of such plays. The nineteenth century satirists Amrita Lal Basu and Gangesh Kumar Chattopadhyay contributed in this literary run of vilifying the sexual widow.
There were, thus, three distinct and separate images alongside the revivalists’ depiction of the ‘spiritually empowered’ widow. Contradictions within these became apparent in many ways. The reworked image of a pure, self-sacrificing widow was put in the forefront of the nationalist-revivalist intellectual canvas, but reformist concerns over their moral and economic fate continued to stir public controversies.

Authors writing in contemporary journals, like *Bamabodhini Patrika* and *Anthapur*, undertook another variety of spurious classifications of widows, some in explicitly sexual terms. The anonymous author of ‘*Bangali Strilokdiger Bartaman Abastha*’ (The present condition of Bengali Women) classified widows into three groups— the *prachina* or elderly/old widow, the *yubati* or the young widow and the *balika*, or child/ infant widow. Older widows (*prachina*), who were presumed to be sexually inactive, were portrayed, as ‘ill-fated hags—utterly useless, redundant and living as parasites’. As mothers, aunts or grandmothers, they were characterized either as needy women or as nagging and interfering hags. Incapable of rendering drudge service, they were sent off to Kashi or Vrindaban. By no means did they conform to the iconic image of a spiritually powerful widow.

Objects of concern were the ‘*yubati bidhaba*’, women who fell between the age of puberty and menopause. They were considered sexually ‘precocious’, hence, the most dangerous. Their awakened sexuality and material insecurity made them, it was believed, automatically prone to sexual laxity. Even the closed precinct of domesticity failed to safeguard their chastity. These young widows were subject to social disgrace and ostracism when accused of incest, abortion or infanticide.

Finally, there were child (or virgin) widows, numerically the largest in Bengal. In 1889, out of 21 million widows in India, 79,000 were below the age of nine, 21,000 were below fourteen and 38,200 were below nineteen. These young girls who did not yet fully realize the dangerous implications of widowhood were, it was argued, the most vulnerable. They fell easy victims to their own instincts and to seducers who sought to take advantage of them.

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
In Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay’s ‘Baidhabya Brata’ (Rites of Widowhood), we find a similar kind of division, in which child widows emerged as the ‘most troublesome category’. To inculcate asceticism and austerity, he recommended that widows should be kept spatially apart from married women. While attention was drawn to the vulnerability of young widows, Bhudeb advised that respect be shown to old and elderly widows. The experienced, widowed mothers, Bhudeb wrote, could even act as heads of the family.\(^{15}\)

It was a perceived sexual anarchy among young and child widows that supported some of the reformist arguments in favour of remarriage. Scandals about abortions and infanticide preoccupied reformers. Indeed, the primary social argument of Vidyasagar, in favour of widow remarriage, had focussed on social morality. In the very first manual, he made an explicit connection between ‘the swelling tide of adultery and abortion’ with ‘a lack of provision of remarriage of widows’.\(^{16}\) However, the series of rejoinders that came against Vidyasagar’s proposal, rejected remarriage as non-Hindu and immoral. Remarriage, itself an act of sexual debauchery, could not provide, they argued, a solution to social immorality. ‘Even a hundred marriages’, wrote Padmalochan Nayaratna, ‘can not eradicate the sexual depravity of widows’.\(^{17}\) If transgressive sexuality was the primary social problem associated with widows, then the solution, conservative ideologues argued, lay in eliminating the widows’ sexual impulse altogether.\(^{18}\) That impossible could only be achieved through the rigorous observance of the rules and rituals enjoined by scriptures. The solution was brahmacharya.

**Reinventing Brahmacharya: Daily Regimen of Widowhood**

The term brahmacharya was applied originally to the first stage in the life of the Vedic Brahman, enjoining the practice of abstinence from sexual and other worldly attachments. Brahmacharya, the vow of celibacy in thought, word and deed, primarily signified, according to the Jajnavalkya Samhita, a ‘controlling of sexual desires’ (Kayena

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\(^{14}\) Bamabodhini Patrika, 293, 4\(^{th}\) kalpa, 3\(^{rd}\) part, Ashad, 1889.


\(^{16}\) Vidyasagar, ‘Dwitiya Pustak’, 164-165.

\(^{17}\) Nayaratna, Bidhaba Bibaha, translation mine.

\(^{18}\) Vidyaratna, Bidhaba Bibaha, translation mine.
It was also defined as the act of carrying or bearing the semen or the sperm and controlling the use of it—'Veerya Dharanam Brahmacharyam'. As the supreme act of control, it regulated the sexual nature of a man.\textsuperscript{19} In sum, the act and practice of brahmacharya aimed at controlling sexual desire, 'Sukrang Sarba Chesta Prabartak'.\textsuperscript{20}

To the ascetic male, brahmacharya signified the sublimation of sex-energy into ojas-sakti for attaining the goal of life or salvation. The word veerya, meaning semen, also connotes masculine prowess, wastage of which under the impulse of lust caused all morbid conditions of mind and body. In the analysis of Swami Vivekananda, brahmacharya was a great sexual force. The ‘real man’ raised himself above animal action, by transforming sexual desire into Ojas or spiritual force.\textsuperscript{21} According to the Upanishadas, Brahman (self-realization or eternal bliss) could be attained by control of rasa and veerya alone—Rasohyeyam Labdha Anandi Bhabati.\textsuperscript{22} In nineteenth century Bengal, a number of nationalist tracts reinvented brahmacharya as a political alternative, available to the Hindu male to reassert his ‘wounded or disciplined masculinity’.\textsuperscript{23}

In the nationalist era, the notion of brahmacharya was reinvented as an option available to the Hindu male to assert his martial (kshatra) prowess. It was the Bengali answer to persistent colonial depictions of the effeminate colonized male and a means of reasserting Bengali masculinity. The notion of brahmacharya reached its pinnacle with the notion of sannyas or complete renunciation. According to Indira Chowdhury Sengupta, brahmacharya and sannyas symbolized a culture of spirituality and an assertion of pride latent in a subjugated nation.\textsuperscript{24} In Vivekananda’s analysis, celibacy was a guarantee against the ‘debased’ and ‘debatable’ venture of marriage.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{19} Girijabhusan Bhattacharya, Brahmacarya, the Author, Dacca, 1919, 1, 15, translation mine.
\textsuperscript{20} Surendranath Kavyatirtha Smritiratna, Brahmacarya Sadhan Bidhi (Rules of attaining Brahmacarya), Chat-Mohan, Pabna, 1927, translation mine.
\textsuperscript{23} Girishchandra Saraswati, Brahmacaryam, Sitanath Mandal, Tamlouk, 1917.
\textsuperscript{24} Chowdhury-Sengupta, ‘Reconstructing Spiritual Heroism’, 132-133.
\textsuperscript{25} Chowdhury, Frail Hero, 125-126.
strength, associated with ascetic masculinity within the nineteenth century Hindu discourse, drew on the idea of sexuality, centring on cosmic power and energy.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* (1882) depicted the image of the brahmachari or the political ascetic, the exercise in celibacy stressed as a means of releasing latent physical strength. But this kind of celibacy, manifesting itself in heroic masculinity, closed the space 'for women as women'. In *Anandamath*, as argued by Chowdhury-Sengupta, Shanti was accommodated among the political ascetics, only when she renounced her domesticity and even her female identity. She was anointed a brahmacharini, even though she continued to be Bhabananda's sahadharmini—in the truest sense, sharing his life and dharma.26

However, in nineteenth century Bengal, the ideal of brahmacharya was redeployed for the Hindu widow, encapsulating rigorous penance and self-mortification. While for a Hindu male, brahmacharya implied a transient phase of abstinence, of learning and intellectual perusal, for a widow it meant a life-long repression of her physical and sexual self.27 A widow was considered 'an outsider' to the realm of marriage and her celibacy signified a rigorous exercise in physical and sexual denial.

With the emergence of cultural nationalism, the theory, ideology and institution of brahmacharya developed dramatically in late nineteenth century Bengal. At the centre was an attempt to reinterpret or, as the protagonists argued, to discover and re-establish the true 'essence' of Hindu scriptural treatises. Rituals of brahmacharya were hardening into rigid prescriptions as context-specific or even trivial injunctions were recovered from sacred texts and accorded the full weight of traditional wisdom. In the *Manu Smriti*, while amgamana (Sati) was advanced as the primary choice, sayyapalana (celibacy) was also given some prominence.28 Manu enjoined on a brahmacharini widow,

*Him to whom her father has given her... let her obsequiously honour, while he lives; and when he dies, let her never neglect him.... Let her continue till death forgiving all injuries, performing harsh duties, avoiding every sensual pleasures, and cheerfully practicing the incomparable rules of virtue, which have been followed by such women as were devoted to one and only one husband.... [L]ike...*

26 'Anandamath', Bankim Rachanabali, 1.
abstemious men, a virtuous wife ascends to heaven, though she have no child, if, after the decease of her lord, she devote herself to pious austerity.29

Even Parasar Samhita, the text used by Vidyasagar to argue a scriptural sanction for widow remarriage, enjoined explicitly that the widow who observed asceticism after her husband’s death was ranked equal to an ascetic male (brahmachari), and attained heaven after her death—(*Mrite Bhartari Ya Nari Brahmacharye Byabasthita, Sa mrita labhate Swargang Yathate Brahmacharinah*).30

The fate of widowhood was assumed to be, in some form or the other, of the widow’s own making. The penance of *brahmacharya* was intended, as a punishment for the widow’s ‘fault’ of outliving her husband. Ascetic widowhood, a necessary aftermath of devoted wifehood, further rationalized deathless marital duty and familial responsibilities through the logic of self-denial. Thus, *brahmacharya* signified an act of expiation (*prayaschitta prakaran*), envisaging rigorous penance and self-mortification. The ‘guilty’ widow was subjected to numerous religious and personal sacrifices.31 In the ritual observances of *brahmacharya*, dietary control received enormous attention. Dinabandhu Nayaratna, a leading opponent of widow remarriage, drew on *Pracheta* to prescribe dietary restrictions for widows. While acts like *Vedadhaycm* (learning the Vedas) were central to a male *brahmachari*, Nayaratna argued, *brahmacharya* forbade a widow to eat betel or take food from brass pots—(*Tambulabhyachanchaiba kangsya patrecha bhojanag / jatischa brahmacharicha bidhabacha bibarjayet*).32 Apart from details of daily habits, food and ritual observances, in *Vaisakha, Kartika* and *Magha*, wrote Henry Colebrook, a faithful widow should exceed the usual duties of ablution, alms and pilgrimage, and use the name of God in prayer.33

*Brahmacharya* was not merely an act of withdrawal; it was an active resistance against the tyranny of the widow’s sexual self. The first line of defence was to discipline her sense of taste. *Mami Smriti* prescribed,

31 Roy, Bangalir Itihas, 292-293.
32 Nayaratna, Bidhoba Bibaha, translation mine.
A widow shall never exceed one meal a day nor sleep on bed. If she does so her husband is cast out from heaven.

.... Let her emaciate her body by living on pure flowers, roots and fruits.... Until death let her be patient of hardships, self controlled and chaste.34

This dietary regimen was also based on a physiological understanding of the relationship between particular food and reproductive potency or sexual desires. Most texts classified ‘cool’ food as having a sexually repressive effect. Food like fish or meat and seed or legume were thought to be naturally heating, moistening or otherwise fuelling the sexual system and were banned for widows. The diet prescribed for widows was intended to promote sexual inactivity. ‘Cool’ food was supposed to control milk, menstruation and to stop the potency of procreation, in short, to bring about the desired ‘sexual death’ of widows.35 But, did the ‘cool food’ succeed in repressing the widow’s sexual self? One early twentieth century tract by Raja Sailendrakrishna Deva observed that the ‘nitrogen, which was produced by rice, vegetables, fruits and milk’, consumed by widows was adequate to stimulate their sexual system.36

Apart from regulating the actual food intake, thus, frequent fasting became an important corollary of brahmacharya. A variety of scriptural expositions by Medhatithi, Kulluka Bhatta, Vayu, Markandeya and Vishnu Purana were invoked to promote fasting on particular days. A widow was enjoined to go through dietary restrictions on triratra, pancharatra, pakshabrata and chandrayan—observing severe penance, according to the lunar cycle of the month.37

These dietary restrictions also had a strong material dimension. The maintenance of the widow meant feeding an extra-mouth in the family. The woman without a husband was, thus, required to eat less and fast often. The widow’s frequent fasting and starving was strongly reciprocated by middle class economic interests.38 The Bengali calendar was

35 Although in a very different context the late ancient discourses on Christian virginity prescribed almost similar regimen on diet and conduct. See Teresa M. Shaw, ‘Creation, Virginity and Diet in Fourth – Century Christianity: Basil on Ancyra’s on the True Purity of Virginity’, Gender and History, Vol. 9, No 3, November 1997, 579-596.
36 Deva, Bidhabar Bibaha Houya Uchit Ki, Na?, 3.
37 Ibid.
38 Uma Chakravarti has explored the issue of material deprivations of widowhood in the context of Western India, Chakravarti, ‘Social Pariahs and Domestic Drudges’.
crowded with dates, on which widows and only widows were supposed to fast. Apart from the fortnightly ‘ekadasi’ and the yearly ‘ambubachi’, widows were subjected to innumerable rituals requiring complete or partial fasting. Ambubachi that occurs on the seventh and the tenth day in the first week of the month of Ashad (June-July) signified, according to Hindu belief, the menstruating period of the earth. During this period, mother-earth is given ‘rest’, and all agricultural activities like tilling and ploughing are forbidden. In the brahminic cultural symbolism, however, a menstruating woman/widow is considered polluted and is forbidden to touch, or even enter, the place of worship and in some cases, the kitchen. During ambubachi, Brahmans, ascetics and widows were forbidden to eat cooked food, as part of a purification process associated with the notion that mother earth was menstruating in this period. However, it was ultimately widows who were burdened with this ritual of purification by fasting for three consecutive days.

The draconian dietary regimen imposed on widows provoked, at times, sympathetic male opposition. Fathers, brothers and other male relatives who had to witness their own (often loved) young daughters or sisters suffer such dietary regime, questioned both the rationality and scriptural basis of these so-called shastric injunctions. Digindranarayan Bhattacharya of the Hindu Mahasabha took, for instance, a liberal view in relation to widow’s brahmacharya. He quoted from Smarta Raghunandan’s ‘Ekadasitattvam’ (Tenets of Ekadasi) to argue that ekadasi was enjoined on everybody, because it was ‘originally designed to tame ekadas (eleven) sense organs of human body. But these days, such severe mortification is prescribed to deny widows their basic means of sustenance’. Referring to the Puranic injunctions, Digindranarayan proclaimed that the rite of ekadasi allowed male ascetics to take milk, fruits and roots or only one meal at night. The diet of dwadasi kalpa of Bhabishya Purana and Vayu Purana included habishyanna (boiled rice with ghee) and panchagabya (milk, curd, ghee, cow-dung and cow urine). While Vishnu Purana and Vrirmaradiya Purana enjoined fasts on ekadasi for every brahmachari (ascetic), grihastha (householder) and banaprastha (renouncer), Digindranarayan argued there was nothing in scriptures that prescribed dietary

39 'Jatina bratinaschaiba bidhabacha dwijasthatha, ambubachi dineschaiba pakang kritwa na bhakshhayet’, courtesy Amulya Ratan Chakraborty.
40 Digindra Narayan Bhattacharyya, Bidhabar Nirjala Ekadasi, (The widow’s fasts on Ekadasi without a drop of water), Calcutta, 1926, translation mine.
restrictions exclusively for widows. 'It was sheer anger, desperation and disdain against the poor widows', he wrote, 'that pushed men to burn women throughout their lives in the name of this merciless and unrelenting custom of ekadasi'.

While Digindranarayan may be lauded for his support for widows, he was quoting Raghunandan to his own end. In his original text Ekadasitattvam (Tenets of Ekadasi), Raghunandan quoted from Katyayan, 'the widow who takes food on the day of ekadasi lost her virtue, and was cursed with the sin of committing foeticide'. According to Kurma Purana, the widow alone was supposed to undertake fasts on all ekadasis in the year, while others were restricted in their performance of the ekadasi fast. In 1909, in the nationalist organ Nabyabharat, Maheshchandra Mallik upheld proscriptions from Mam, Parasar and even Raghunandan Smriti forbidding widows to take food and drink on ekadasis.

The debate about the widow’s diet was never quite settled, and by the end of the nineteenth century, these strictures began to be glorified and aestheticised. A rather aggressive defence came from the nineteenth century Bengali dramatist, Amrita Lal Basu. In his autobiographical verses, he hailed his widowed mother who refused to take a drop of water on a scorching mid-summer ekadasi day, even when she had an attack of cholera. Amrita Lal eulogized, ‘we have nothing to take pride in, except widows in our Bengali homes’.

The voice of women writers, many of them widows, was marked by deep ambivalence towards the prescribed dietary regimen. Eminent poet Mankumari Basu, widowed at the age of eighteen, described ekadasi as the most ‘cursed and deadly rite’. Later in the essay, she, however, wrote that ‘the fast of ekadasi is the supreme touchstone of our virtue. The white attire of widowhood is the insignia of heavenly love and brahmacharya is the sole way of worshipping …our husband’. Widowed poet Mrinalini

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid, 4-5.
43 Raghunandan Bhattacharyya, Ekadasitattvam (Tenets of Ekadasi), Nikhil Banga Seba Samiti, Calcutta, 126-27, translation mine.
Debi glorified the traditional rituals associated with ascetic widowhood. She described the rite of *ekadasi* as a constant reminder of the widow’s lost love; hence ‘fasting twice in a month hardly torments the body’. Later in life, Mrinalini was remarried to the Brahmo reformer Nirmal Chandra Sen, son of Keshab Chandra Sen.

Writing in *Antahpur*, a leading woman’s magazine of Bengal, Netyakali Debi was less ambivalent. She highlighted the ‘absurdity’ of dietary and other restrictions:

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\ldots [F]or a widow of seven or eight years the word *brahmacharya* sounded like a life-time torture. Expressions like ‘cooling down’ the ‘burning pain’ might appear curious and unfamiliar, since a widow of eleven hardly knew the nature of ‘the pain’, let alone the proper way to ‘cool it down’.  
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Radharani Debi, the noted poet of twentieth century Bengal, was widowed at thirteen, and later remarried to poet Narendra Dev at the age of twenty-eight in 1931. Nabaneeta Dev Sen, their daughter, narrated in her autobiographical writing how the child widow was subjected to a harsh regimen in her natal house, where ‘her presence itself was a strain—an inauspicious presence’. The widowed Radharani was forced to take off her jewellery by her mother, who chopped off her hair and forced her to take up the widow’s diet—*habishyanna*. On *ekadasi* days, Radharani ate nothing and drank nothing. While taking bath, she was always accompanied into the bathroom to ensure that she did not gulp a few drops from the bath water.

In *Pinjare Basia*, Kalyani Dutt discusses the intense suffering of widowed women on *ekadasi* through several anecdotes. In the nineteenth century, in a village of East Bengal, the mother of a sick, four-year-old widowed girl cleverly contrived her nourishment. Apart from milk, the girl would take food at frequent intervals from the same plate, without washing her hands and mouth, thus abiding by the dictum of ‘eating one meal a day’.

Food apart, the widow was also required to surrender all forms of ornamentation and beautification. The ‘pleasures of the flesh’ were to be completely denied. A widow

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49 Netyakali Debi, ‘*Baidhyaba Jibaner Chitra*’ (Portrayal of a widow’s life), *Antahpur*, 7, November 1902, translation mine.


must not only close up her senses, but also take steps to change her external appearance. The widow’s asceticism reflected virtue in every activity, word, gesture, thought and glance. Scriptures ruled as a standard warning to shun any inviting maquillage and to obscure any feminine charm. The socio-sexual status of a Hindu widow involved an explicit deglamourisation. Uma Chakravarti argues that in the symbolic structure of colours, widows were assigned the ‘white’, associated with a lack of colour, in contrast to the vibrant ‘red’, the attire of the bride, signifying life, fertility, passion and sexuality. The widow’s white weeds underlined a continued association with death and her non-bride status, her asexuality.\(^{53}\)

The ritual that was designed to perfect the widow’s ‘sexual death’ was that of tonsure. In the early Hindu texts, there was no reference to tonsure, rather unkempt and unbound hair indicated a state of mourning. The notion of sin and pollution, being lodged in the hair, argues Chakravarti, appeared to have been widespread, and was a ubiquitously held belief among the Hindus of north India, especially in Benares.\(^{54}\) Where hair symbolized fortune, auspiciousness and purity, abundant hair was a sign of sexual energy, feminine charm and even wantonness in certain cases. The grooming and exhibition of hair invoked erotic passions, while tonsure signified de-sexed femininity, symbolic of the loss of power, freedom, and even of fascination. In Bengal, the practice varied in accordance with caste preferences, tousled and rumpled hair being a visible identification of Bengali high caste Hindu widows even those living in Benares, Mathura and Vrindaban. Anthropologists, like Leach and Obeyesekere, have explored the metaphorical structure of hair, and its relationship to sexuality in the context of renunciation, asceticism and sexual restraint. They argue that the removal of hair connoted a symbolic castration even as the dishevelled hair implied asceticism and a repudiation of the very existence of sex. Hair behaviour embraced a set of conscious sexual behaviours and played a crucial role in the rites of passage, involving the formal transfer from married to widowed status.\(^{55}\) Chakravarti explains that the tonsure of

\(^{52}\) Ibid.

\(^{53}\) Chakravarti, ‘Gender, Caste and Labour’, 75-76.

\(^{54}\) Ibid, 77.

widows marked her entry into the arena of social death. Enforced tonsure was a violent demonstration of brahminic patriarchal dominance, and a means of controlling widows through humiliation and mortification.  

During 1884-1886, the Parsi reformer Malabari raised the issue of forcible tonsure. In responding to his Notes on Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood, the indigenous elite was, however, not unanimous in condemning the practice. According to Rangrao V. Purandhari, ‘no widows are forced to shave their heads’; the shaving of a widow’s head was a religious practice, as widows ‘get their heads shaved of their own accord’. Rao Saheb V.N. Mandalik also considered that a ‘higher kind of life’ for the ‘wounded soul’ of widows must have included ‘shaving her head’. In his response to the official investigation, Venkat Rango Katti of Bombay, however, suggested an effectual suppression of the shaving of widows by Sections 320 and 325 of the Penal Code. While these conservatives preferred to call tonsure a religious ritual, scathing criticism came from an anonymous Hindu Lawyer,  

As religious a practice... cropping a widow’s hair is, I conceive, another sacrament, a religious ‘trapping and suit of woe’ which requires a filthy barber’s services every month.  

Brahmacharya, in sum, signified the process of cutting off, closing up, stamping down, and reigning in, to rebuild the ascetic body as a temple and a dead stump. Condemning such forced restraint, proceedings of the Legislative Council of India of 1856 perceived brahmacharya as an unnatural exercise against one’s self. In the words of J.P Grant,  

...[I]t was difficult to say whether they were more remarkable for their cruelty or for their fantastic absurdity. Not only must she see no man, she must also avoid every approach to ease and luxury, or pleasure; she must wear no ornaments; her hair must be shaved or at least worn dishevelled, she must not see her face in a mirror, ...and her dress must be plain, coarse and dirty. Besides other fasts, perhaps a dozen in the year, [she] is to abstain absolutely from food and drink twice a month one day and night.... All amusements are strictly prohibited...This was the life to which a little prattling girl of five years old, taken from her

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56 Chakravarti, ibid, 63-66.  
57 Gidumal, Status of Women, LXXVII.  
58 Ibid, 197  
59 ‘A Symposium of Hindu Domestic Reformers and Anti-Reformers’, Gidumal, ibid, LXXV.
dolls and toys and pronounced to be a widow, was condemned for the whole remainder of her existence upon earth.\textsuperscript{60}

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, doubts began to mount against the power of brahmacharya as a social sanction. Govindrao V. Joshi maintained that the horrible pain inflicted on the widows entailed life long suffering. ‘The butcher cuts the throat of an animal but once for all and the consequent pain and torture are over in a moment once for all, but the unceasing sufferings of bereaved widows are lifelong’.\textsuperscript{61} In a similar vein, Joterao Phuley, a vocal critic of brahminism in Western India, wrote, ‘the widow is stripped of her ornaments, is not well-fed, is not properly clothed, is not allowed to join pleasure parties, marriages and religious ceremonies. In fact, she is bereft of all worldly enjoyments, nay she is considered lower than a culprit or a mean beast…’\textsuperscript{62}

The reformist lobby had not given up their agenda altogether. While cultural nationalists sought to glorify brahmacharya and uphold asceticism vis a vis remarriage as a ‘solution’ to the widow problem, many reformers continued to advocate remarriage as the only ‘civilised’ option. They pointed out the absurdity of trying to reinvent scriptural sanctions for prescribing the widow’s daily regimen. They also highlighted the brutality and violence implicit in coercive tonsure and fasting. In Bengal, however, the failure of a state-led attempt to ‘enable’ remarriage had become quite clear by the 1870s and 1880s. The reformists had made little headway in popularising widow remarriage. If anything, intermediary and lower castes, which had permitted widow remarriage earlier, were adopting prohibition of remarriage as part of a ‘Sanskritisaiion’ strategy.\textsuperscript{63} Many writers and intellectuals believed that the chief problem with Vidyasagar’s programme had been the focus on legislation. The hand of an alien colonial state doomed the project from the very beginning. These debates, however, were not settled yet. The question of state and social reform was to reach its peak, as shown in the earlier chapter, during the Age of Consent debates in the 1890s. Meanwhile, in the 1880s, Behramji Malabari, a Parsi reformer based in Bombay, undaunted by the failure of the Widow Remarriage Act, sought fresh and renewed state intervention on the question of ‘enforced widowhood’. He

\textsuperscript{60} Proceedings of Act XV of 1856, 12-15.
\textsuperscript{61} ‘Symposium’, Gidumal, Status of Women, LXXV.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, LXXVIII.
\textsuperscript{63} Bandyopadhyay, ‘Caste, Widow Remarriage’. 
had a two-pronged strategy: to have the state actually sponsor and protect widows who wished to remarry; and to outlaw the imposition of *brahmacharya*, which was, in his view, coercive by definition.

**Enforced Widowhood and State Intervention: Malabari’s ‘Notes’**

During 1884-1886, thirty years after the passage of the Widow Remarriage Act, asceticism came to receive unprecedented attention both at the intellectual and the official level. In Bombay, directly after the Rukhmabai case began to hit the headlines, Behramji Malabari started circulating his famous *‘Notes on Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood’* across the nation. The last section has already discussed Malabari’s *Notes on Infant Marriage*, published in the wake of the Rukhmabai Case and the Age of Consent controversy. This section will focus on his arguments against *Enforced Widowhood*, in which he sought state intervention in eradicating *brahmacharya* or ‘enforced’ celibacy. The Parsi stood for the reformist sense of male guilt at double-standards prevalent in society, and sought for a change in the status of the Hindu widow. During the Age of Consent agitations, Malabari labelled orthodox Hindu leaders as ‘effeminate fanatics’, set upon by ‘unmanly and unmannerly factions’. According to Burton, however, Malabari did not develop ‘a hyper-masculinized chivalry’, rather identified himself with Indian women and especially with Hindu widows.64 In his *Notes*, Malabari professed great sympathy for widows—claiming, he not only ‘speaks for the widow’, but ‘as the widow’.65 His desire to speak as a female victim, argued Malabari, made him capable of understanding the pain and suffering of widows. He promised to alleviate the suffering of ‘the poor daughters of India’ with a mother’s love.66 Burton has argued that by privileging himself as mother, Malabari offered himself as the asexual, reliable and, above all, the self-carrier of colonial reform in India.67

Malabari’s *Notes* consisted of several articles, which launched attacks on the Hindu caste system and *brahminic* patriarchy that ‘oppressed and tyrannized’ widows in

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64 Burton, “A ‘Pilgrim Reformer’”, 177, 182.
65 Gidumal, *Life and Life-Work*, 201.
67 Burton, ibid, 189.
the name of brahmacharya. He affirmed, 'To be sure, there are thousands of young widows leading pure, if not happy lives'. But,

[T]here must be millions of simple misguided creatures, exposed to all sorts of trials and temptations, whose lives are a curse to themselves and in some instances, a standing menace to the society.68

Malabari argued whereas Sati was 'a single act of martyrdom or heroism', enforced widowhood was a perpetual agony, a burning to death by slow fire. Drawing attention to the frequent moral lapses committed by widows, the reformer maintained, 'every village was covered by the shame or may be in daily dread of having to do so'. 'There is a regular case of free masonry maintained for this purpose', he said, 'the removal of the widow in trouble or visits to distant relations or on pilgrimage—which baffles detection'.69

The caste system also came under the attack of his Notes. The philosophy of caste and religion, which 'acted as the true constraints on widow remarriage', according to Malabari, was only reserved for women. The caste norm, accused Malabari, 'has no objection to the widower marrying again, so often as he likes, and more women than one at a time if he so wishes'.70 In case of an unseemly encounter between caste and code, the Government had to enact codes to counter the tyranny of caste. He urged, 'Declare that the widow, being the State's adopted daughters, shall not be wronged by caste, and that even if custom allows the wrong to be perpetrated, the victim shall be avenged by law'.71

While a number of state officers had been publicly critical of ascetic practices of widowhood, explicit state surveillance of widowhood, enforced or voluntary, ran graver risks. In Bengal, once the seat of the reformist stalwarts, Malabari's Notes provoked intense reaction. An essay, published in Bamabodhini Patrika, carried a variety of arguments against Malabari's proposals. The anonymous writer maintained, 

Behramji Malabari, though not a Hindu himself, is embarked on the reform of Hindu society with his much-celebrated altruism. This, indeed, is a task of earnest endeavour and immense perseverance.

68 Malabari, 'Notes on Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood', Life and Life Work, 7.
69 Ibid.
70 Malabari, 'Widows and Caste', ibid, 58.
While he [certainly] deserves everyone’s thanks and gratitude, it is also certain that he will never succeed in his project.72

At one level, objections focussed on the Parsi identity of Malabari, who could not be expected to comprehend Hindu ideas about female chastity and integrity. The strongest protest was raised against the prospect of state intervention in the sphere of Hindu religion.

The nationwide circulation of the Notes provoked strident reactions. The British Indian Association of Bengal believed the ‘introduction’ of widow remarriage necessitated ‘a complete boulversement of the Hindu social fabric, which can not readily be accomplished’.73 Rao Sahib Mandalik went a step forward to declare that there ‘is certainly no enforced widowhood in India at present. I do not understand what reform is needed’.74 Similarly affirmed Pattaviram, ‘the majority of Hindu widows will not listen to but actually shun the company of, nay detest the company of those sympathising philanthropists …for the sin of remarriage is deeply engraven at present on their minds’.75 A. Sankariah, representing the Hindu Sabha, declared that ‘celibacy was meritorious to all castes, and in all creeds and races’. The object of the reform movement or agitation, he accused, was to deprive the minority of their religious function.76 A more candid rejection of widow remarriage came from Ghaneshyamji, ‘the thing called woman is the crowning piece of all the objects of enjoyments in this world’. ‘Like a dining leaf used previously by another person’, he said, ‘she is unfit to be enjoyed by another person’.77

In response to the prospect of state intervention into ascetic widowhood, Chandmohan Bandyopadhyay of the Jessore Indian Association held that the term ‘enforced widowhood’ was itself a ‘misnomer’. The life long brahmacharya was ‘the expression of the widow’s peculiar notions of chastity and not in any way the result of social oppression’. The widow ‘voluntarily sunk in the abyss of her unfathomable

72 Anonymous, ‘Bibaha Samaskar Sambandhe Malabari Mahasayer Chesta’ (Endeavour of Mr. Malabari in reforming marriage), Bamabodhini Patrika, 310, 1890, 247, translation mine.
73 Gidumal, Status of Women, 180.
74 Ibid, I.
75 Ibid, II.
76 NAI, Home-Public, 1886, Hindu Sabha Series, No-1, Trichoor, 7 December 1885, 47.
77 Gidumal, Status of Women, 217.
miseries, unmoved by the luxuries and temptations... (and adopted) the life of seclusion and mortification'. The reformist effort to get them remarried was an 'absurd and impossible task'.

Malabari retorted, 'if the widow is always a willing victim, if her widowhood not compulsory, what prevents the Widow Remarriage movement from growing?' 'What is the raison de etre of so many Remarriage Associations in this country? Has the venerable Vidiasagar been fighting only a phantom in Bengal for the last forty years?' 'If the widow had her choice', Malabari asked, 'why can't you avert from her the curse of excommunication?' Citing several newspaper articles, lectures, plays, pamphlets, odes, appeals and official reports, he asked, 'is all this mere hallucination?' While the state continued to hang and transport widows for the crime of murder, Malabari said, 'it is no use society grumbling that the state does not come to its rescue'. Expressing dejection, he said, 'I sincerely pity your countrymen. Your tactics seem to be to throw a sort of lurid light over the truth and to mesmerize her in half-dark'.

To make the Act XV of 1856 a social reality, Malabari pressed the state to guarantee certain facts. First, the state must ascertain that the widow had adopted perpetual seclusion voluntarily. Secondly, every widow, of whatever age, should have the right to complain to the authorities and thirdly, the priest should not have the right to excommunicate the relations and connections of the parties contracting second marriages. While most officials deemed such suggestions impractical and unworkable, some like Leonard Courtney, Deputy Speaker at the House of Commons, held it necessary in making every attempt to overawe or impede individual liberty punishable. He questioned the absurdity of the ascetic rite itself, 'I know not why ... the obligation of dedicating the whole of a life to the memory [say rather "to the dominion"] of a husband with whom there may never have been married life, should not also vanish. Unhappy women now often suffer a fate worse than sati'.

Contemporary journal, *Gujarat Mitra*, endorsing Malabari's stand, asked the hesitant government,

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78 WBSA, General Proceedings, Jessore, 10 June 1885, File 90-30/37.
81 Malabari, ibid.
You answer that you were constrained to put down Suttee because it involved the crime of murder. Well then, what does enforced widowhood involve? What about the widow procuring abortions one to ten times, and committing infanticides? ...What is all this but crime, crime and crime.83

Malabari succeeded in reinvoking the widespread anxiety about the widow’s sexuality, and sought its regulation through law. However, the wisdom of state intervention into private matters came under serious scrutiny, especially after the mutiny of 1857. Sir S. Bayley, member of the Viceregal Council, affirmed that the sphere within which Government can usually legislate in social matters ‘is really very limited, and to legislate on marriage question in the face of the whole bulk of the conservative sentiment, custom and religious pride of the country would be both useless and mischievous’.84 H.H. Risley analysed limitations of Malabari’s quasi-legal treatise under certain heads. First of all, the attitude of the most advanced class of educated men who sympathized with the movement was still clouded with apprehensions. Then there were the uneducated mass of people, with rather vague notions of the shastras but keen to follow and appreciate the upper caste points of social precedence. Widow remarriage, they now perceived as a badge of social degradation, a custom associated with ‘Doms, Boonas and Bagdis and “chota log” of various kinds’. Similar was the stand of the aboriginals and tribes living at the bottom of society who preferred to throw off their low-caste status by their abstention from widow remarriage.85 The reforms, advocated by Malabari, were so distasteful to the higher castes that they showed no great anxiety to adopt his suggestions, even after thirty years of its legal enactment.

With cultural nationalism gathering steady momentum, the government construed that the educated Hindus, ‘in the resentful spirit (a transient spirit let us hope)’ which ‘is unhappily concomitant of their political awakening’, were now defending ‘infant marriage’ and ‘enforced widowhood’, because they conceive those practices to be home-growths as opposed to alien importations.86 In the whole history of the Act XV of 1856, regarding the forfeiture by Hindu widows of their deceased husband’s property, on

82 Gidumal, Status of Women, 208.
85 NAI, Home-Public, November 1886, proceeding nos 131-138E, 23, 27.
remarriage and excommunication, various discussions had taken place among officers—foreign and indigenous. Finally they arrived at the 'sensible' decision of 'not to touch it' again for the second time.

The Ascetic Nation Mother: Myths of Widowhood

Malabari's Notes had few takers. Critics of ascetic widowhood were being increasingly marginalized towards the close of the nineteenth century. In 1856, Vidyasagar had succeeded in persuading the government to 'enable' widow remarriage despite virulent opposition. In 1884-86, however, the government was uncertain about Malabari's proposals. In the period between the 1850s and 1880s, the widow problem had undergone some perceptible changes. Chief architects of this change were the new generation of nationalist Bengali writers, who chose to celebrate the widow's ascetic austerity not only as the best solution to the widow problem, but also as an index of India's cultural/spiritual superiority over the West. They rejected the project of widow remarriage as being socially or morally debilitating for women (as well as for the nation). With an increasing emphasis on the deathless fidelity for women within marriage, nationalists invoked the brahmacharini widow as the veritable icon of the emergent nation.

The foremost defence of this ideal came from the Bangadarshan lobby in Bengal. In 1885, Akshaya Chandra Sarkar, the eminent protagonist of cultural nationalism, described brahmacharya as the natural, normal and spiritual symbol of Aryavarta. Sarkar hailed asceticism as selfless piety (niskam karya), even superior to self-immolation or Sati, designed to reach the ultimate goal in life. Romanticizing the deprivation of brahmacharya, Sarkar remarked,

[T]he widow, with her unkempt hair and worn out apparel stands firm in the vow of asceticism to sustain the morale of the Bengali Hindu society. Without the existence of a celibate widow in our family the place of worship might have turned into a drawing room, the crouton might replace the holy basil (tulsi) plant and our sacred stone shalagram might have turned into billiards....

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86 Ibid, 34.
The reformist provision of widow remarriage, described Sarkar, a chief spokesman of revivalism, would taste like a ‘hot ice cream’. ‘If one wants it hot, the ice would melt and if one prefers the ice, it can not remain hot’. While ‘pativrata’ or deathless devotion to one’s husband was considered as ‘refreshingly cool’, Sarkar put down widow remarriage as ‘oppressingly hot’. The figure of the ascetic widow, clad in white, was deified as the true icon of the subject nation. For the widow’s blessed existence, affirmed Sarkar, ‘we can still find one light amidst abysmal darkness. The upsurge of the terrifying flood tide is certainly looming large at this darkest hour of night. But [presence of] this immaculate icon still makes us believe, it is possible to hold the surge and check the flood’. He beseeched, ‘don’t ever try to remove this revered woman from her holy pedestal, in the name of law, agitation, sympathy and civilization’.

While the entire kali era bore testimony against Hindu widow’s remarriage, Sarkar emphasized, the ‘aberration’ of widow remarriage had been always in vogue among the lower castes, the Muslims and among the culturally impoverished. Sarkar also rejected the reformist critique of double standards of sexual morality that disadvantaged the widow vis a vis the widower. Reformers asked, ‘If a widower can marry several times, why not a widow?’ Sarkar bounced back,

The Hindu believes in the theory of proportion and not of equality. While A is not equal to B, they should not deserve the same treatment. A woman is always different from and inferior to a man. The question of equal rights and justices, even in similar cases, thus must not arise at all.

‘I have heard many strange arguments against widow remarriage’, an immediate retort came from Behramji Malabari, ‘but none as queer as this’, as raised by Akshaya Sarkar. Another rejoinder came from an anonymous writer of Bengal (later identified as the nationalist leader Bipin Chandra Pal) who questioned, ‘why should brahmacharya, the noblest virtue, be observed by widows alone? While we men, can dump it in the trash, in

88 Ibid.
89 This argument was repeatedly voiced in relation to the Rukhmabai Case of Maharashtra. The cultural nationalists rejected the option of widow remarriage, which, they believed, was a lower caste phenomenon, unacceptable to high caste widows. The flexible norms of the Sutar caste, to which Rukhmabai belonged, allowed her mother to remarry after the death of her husband. The nationalists made it a point to decry Rukhmabai’s defiance of Hindu conjugal norms, and her marital infidelity, as a low caste aberration.
90 Sarkar, ‘Hindu Bidhabar’, 177, translation mine.
the darkest corner of our old house, the widow is obliged to recover and sustain it with ardent care. Does the woman alone require spiritual salvation?"

The question is whether Hindu widows adopt *brahmacharya* by choice or from fear. Is the Hindu widow *brahmacharini* because she fears our condemnation...? Or does she sacrifice her life from her own heart’s prompting, to slake her own thirst of life? Truth to tell, this question can have only one answer. The Hindu widow’s *brahmacharya* is usually not chosen of her free, independent will but dictated by her fear of social sanctions.92

*Brahmacharya*, the essay declared, was a routine drill observed under social pressure. Akshaya Chandra, said Pal, depicted a highly implausible image of the ascetic widow, far from the reality of the flesh and blood widows.93

In Bengal, such contrary voices found few supporters. While writers like Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay waxed lyrical in hailing ‘widowhood’ as the most glorious rite,94 Nistarini Debi eulogized *brahmacharya* as an exemplary instance of widow’s devotion to her deceased lord. Nistarini maintained that a widow must carry the signs of her irrevocable loss on her body to remind herself of the obligations she had assumed as a wife.95 In 1921, Ganapati Sarkar Vidyaratna scathingly criticized remarriage as a possible alternate of *brahmacharya*. Debunking Vidyasagar’s argument on both scriptural and social counts, Sarkar went to redefine *brahmacharya* as the ultimate panacea to mitigate the sexual pangs of a widow.96 He cited from Vedic and Puranic sources that enjoined a widow, who failed to die along with her deceased lord, to mortify herself with her head tonsured. Sarkar referred to *Angira* that cursed the widow to go to hell, if she wore dyed or indigo coloured attire after the death of her husband. Sarkar also cited from *Jajnavalkya*, which blessed the widow who never got attached to another man throughout her life to play in the heaven with her husband. An ascetic widow was, everywhere, endowed with glory.97


93 Ibid


96 I have discussed at length the argument of Ganapati Sarkar Vidyaratna against Vidyasagar’s proposal on widow remarriage in Chapter 1.

Sarkar diagnosed that the excess of ‘mucus’ (rasa) in a widow’s body was ‘the source of her sexual stimulation’. To control this stimulation, a widow must practice sexual abstinence or brahmacharya. According to Sarkar, abstinence (nibritti) involved only two components, stoicism (bairagya) and practice (abhyas). He maintained that the husband was everywhere idealized as the only source of sexual pleasure for a woman, even at the time of menstruation and even after being widowed. Echoing sentiments of cultural nationalism, Ganapati Sarkar said,

Oh India! You have lost everything. This immaculate deity is your lingering last respite. What a misfortune! The idol, the unsullied deity that you hold in your heart at your dying state…. may leave you forever. 98

Sarkar made another confession, ‘Truth to tell, one or two widows are required in every family. It may sound unkind, but God has created this icon of sacrifice to serve others’. Indeed, said Sarkar, ‘no one can replace a childless, husbandless woman who serves ailing patients so selflessly. If she has her own child and husband, can she look after the patients of contagious diseases?’99

In material terms, brahmacharya enjoined certain explicit, observable and elaborate sacrifices as the ideal vehicle of spiritual fulfilment. The need to emphasize feminine dependence required new accommodations between asceticism and drudgery. No amount of rigid adherence to ritual seemed to be enough in the realization of asceticism. An essay ‘Bidhabar Acharan’ (The behaviour of Widows) in Bamabodhini Patrika, regretted the ‘unfortunate tendency towards luxury and laxity among the widows of Calcutta. In an affluent Calcutta household, a child widow is allowed to take tea in the morning, to have a full meal at lunch and a dish of luchi and mutton for dinner’.100

Condemning the sartorial changes of urban, middle class widows, the author quoted from the contemporary popular saint, Ramakrishna Paramhansa, ‘if one wears a black-bordered white than, the heart leans towards tappa (the popular amorous songs). When

98 Ibid, 97.
99 Ibid.
100 Anonymous, ‘Bidhabar Acharan’ (Behaviour of Widows), Bamabodhini Patrika, nos 496-497, 8 kalpa, 1 part, 42 year, Agrahayan-Poush, 1904, 276, translation mine.
one wears saffron, the mind instinctively turns spiritual'. By early twentieth century, the high caste ideal of brahmacharya was slowly permeating into the low and intermediary castes. Writing in the 1930s, Taraknath Sadhu Roy Bahadur, equally deplored in his caste-journal, Gandhabanik, the trend towards unwholesome luxury, indulged by widows. In urban families, said Taraknath, widows seldom practiced abstinence. The ideal of self-abnegation would be at stake, if widows were allowed to take delight in ‘theatre, bioscope, fancy fair, cinema and other enjoyments’, along with the other married women of the house.

Resenting the latitude in ascetic practice, the author of ‘Bidhabar Acharan’ suggested ‘.... If you really want to uplift their conditions, try to introduce widow remarriage. Otherwise, experiments with feeding them tea, fish and meat may do good to the Bengali babus who have earned fame as reformers, but will have a miserable impact on the poor widows of Bengal.’ In this essay, the ‘remarriage solution’ was used as a rhetorical device, offered in an ironic spirit. The concern of the writer was to uphold the legitimate, i.e. marital sexuality. Otherwise, the widow was not permitted an easy and comfortable life, without getting re-attached to a man. In a country where remarriage of widows was impossible and widows had to remain widows throughout their lives, the author argued, brahmacharya made admirable sense.

While the reformist option of remarriage promised widows an easier life with better food and clothing, conservative exponents like Shantimoyee Debi made a strong appeal,

You will never find happiness by forgetting your first husband. Of course, you will get proper clothing, healthy food and a good number of children. But is this the essence of human life? Men get remarried and take many advantages. You can also get those advantages but then where lies your greatness? If you can acquire spiritual exertion without getting remarried, why then accept servitude under male dominance?

101 In some areas of central and western Bengal (Rahr), the ‘tribidha’ widows followed a more rigid code of abstinence. They used to wear saffron, instead of the white than, and kept their heads tonsured. Ibid.
Writing in the nationalist journal, *Savitri*, Shyamasundari Debi vehemently rejected the option of remarriage. Reacting to the current debates on widow remarriage she wrote, 'a woman who could ever think of remarriage with another man was not a *kulabati* (devoted housewife), but a *kulata* (a degraded prostitute)'\(^{105}\) Any slip from asceticism and the very thought of remarriage prompted nationalist revulsion. Pandit Guttulal, thus, ruled against any slackening of the severity of *brahmacharya*,

If all the widows in the world would practice their own duties night and day, such as avoiding music and singing of all kinds, associating with good men, devotion to God, not taking plenty of food and too many ornaments, ...where will be any occasion for them to cause miscarriage or commit countless of other sins?\(^{106}\)

In this kind of nationalist ideology, the ascetic practice of widowhood was being hailed as the bedrock of Hindu tradition, linked with marriage, family, caste, tradition and the nation. However, these views were not uncontested. There were still a variety of reformist lobbies highlighting the social, moral and economic ills, associated with widowhood. To offer *brahmacharya* as a solution to the widow problem, the ideal of ascetic widowhood had to be reinvented. The external and ritual observances of fasting, tonsure and deglamorisation had to be re-imbued with new spiritual and moral connotations.

**Transcending Asceticism: Internalising Sacrifice**

The failure of asceticism was felt to lie in the fact that it was, as Bipin Chandra Pal had so perceptibly pointed out in his rejoinder against Akshaya Chandra Sarkar’s defence of *brahmacharya*, an imposition on the widow. The draconian practices associated with widowhood, in whose defence cultural nationalists had spilt so much ink in the late nineteenth century, could not be easily reconciled with a ‘voluntary’ act, nor could this rescripting of ‘tradition’ be easily repudiated. Moreover, official and reformist writers never tired of showing the failure of enforced widowhood. The evidence was clear in the enumeration of urban prostitution, continued incidence of abortions and destitution of old widows. By the twentieth century, mere religious sanction seemed no longer enough. To

\(^{105}\) Shyamasundari Debi, ‘*Hindu Bidhabar*’, translation mine.
play its assigned role as a signifier of the moral and spiritual greatness of the nation, *brahmacharya* had to be relocated within the widow’s own conscience, a ‘choice’ exercised with full understanding of its elevating moral principles. *Brahmacharya* had to transcend externalities of ritual—to make a claim on the widow’s mind and spirit. The widow herself became the key to the understanding of *brahmacharya*.

‘*Brahmacharya* can hardly succeed only by physical penance if a widow’s mind is vitiating and her soul is sullied’, wrote the essayist of ‘*Bangali Strilokdiger Bartaman Abastha*’ in *Bamabodhini Patrika*. ‘To become a truly dispassionate widow’, it was argued, ‘a woman must develop a sublime character with a degree of restraint and sacrifice’.107 As a long-standing custom, the author argued, asceticism was enforced willy-nilly on widows who undertook the external rites of *brahmacharya* under duress. The widow’s *brahmacharya*, which was strained by the wear and tear of every day life, appeared as a mere surrender to the tyranny of *desachar* and *lokachar*. Comprehensive physical deprivation proved difficult to sustain as young widows rebelled against social custom and sought a variety of escape routes by elopement and migration.108

The answer to this complex problem was fashioned in the hands of a few master novelists in early twentieth century Bengal. They reinvented the ritual as an internalised taboo, within the nature of the widow. Eminent novelist of early twentieth century Bengal, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, extensively dealing with the issue of widowhood, sought to represent widows as naturally dedicated to celibacy and asceticism. In ‘*Patha Nirdesh*’ (Showing the way), the young widow Hemnalini’s adoption of *brahmacharya* was not an expression of bereavement for her dead husband. Rather, it resolved the dilemma between her desires for another man, Gunindra, whom she loved, and her own prejudice against remarriage. It was an expression of guilt, arising from the widow’s revulsion against remarriage and a realization of the illegitimacy of her desire. Asceticism was the instrument with which she shut off her own sexuality. *Brahmacharya* became the expression of the widow’s watchful conscience. Sarat Chandra graphically stated, ‘as the jail authorities beleaguered the most dreaded criminals by raising up the

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108 Ibid.
walls of the cell, similarly Hem tried to wall up the devil of passion, residing within her heart.  

Brahmacharya was neither spontaneous nor enforced. It was an internalised interdiction within feminine nature. Self-abnegation was better, agreed the twentieth century nationalists, when self-imposed than when externally enforced. At the political front, the Gandhian ideal of celibacy lent added strength to the ideal of brahmacharya. True discipline emanated from within, as Gandhi believed, ‘inhibitions imposed from outside rarely succeed, but when they are self-imposed, they have a decidedly salutary effect’. Gandhi declared that a Hindu widow was the ‘personification of renunciation’, who could ‘adopt both her sex and nation’. ‘A real Hindu widow is a treasure,’ said Gandhi. ‘She is one of the gifts of Hinduism to humanity. God created nothing finer than the Hindu widow’. At the same time, Gandhi found the presence of too many widows in Hindu society a serious menace, ‘like sitting on a mine, which may explode at any moment’. But he recommended remarriage, only when a widow could not restrain herself, for ‘it is better to marry openly than to live in sin’. Gandhi said, ‘when I see a widow, I instinctively bow my head in reverence. A man is but a clod before her’. As early as the 1920s, he said that impatient reformers would merely say that remarriage was the only straight and simple remedy for mitigating the trauma of widowhood. Gandhi was rather cautious, ‘there are many widows in my family but I can never bring myself to advise them to remarry and they will not think of doing so either. The real remedy is for men to take a pledge that they will not remarry’.

Wide disparity rather than a single voice of resolution characterized the writings of contemporary widows. Anonymously written Bidhaba Bamar Shokoki (Mournful tales of a widowed woman) expressed emotional bereavement and affliction of a young

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109 Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, ‘Patha Nirdesh’ (Showing the way), Sarat Rachanabali, 3, 129, translation mine.
112 Young India, August 19, 1926.
113 Quoted in Patel, ibid, 53.
Mankumari Basu seldom raised her voice against ascetic ritual. Some of her poems, like *Sahamaran* (dying by co-cremation), *Abhagini* (the wretched woman), *Patitodhyarini* (one who salvages sinners, the river Ganges), however, decried enforced celibacy. In *Abhagini*, she questioned the obsessive emphasis laid on deprivation that was a means to 'kill an infant' dressed up as a 'celibate and dumb nun'. However, her *Priya Prasanga Ba Harano Pronoy* (With reference to my beloved or the lost love) stood as an exemplary elucidation of virtuous widowhood. *Marubhume Marichika* (The mirage in the desert) was a sad description of the bedroom once shared by the widow with her husband. 'I could surrender even the rapture of heaven when I entered this room.... Once been the abode of endless joy and happiness, the room appears like a lifeless corpse, barren like a widow'.

*Mukure Mukh* (The face in the mirror) compared the bedecked married look of a wife with the bare state of widowhood, 'now I am not required to adorn my hair, to apply the vermilion, hence no need to see my face in the mirror'. In *Chitrapat* (The canvas) and *Durgyotsav* (The festival of worshipping goddess Durga), Mankumari used myriad contrast imageries, like scorched desert-sands and flower-strewn gardens in spring, to bring out the dissimilarity between widowhood and wifehood. In her short story, *Banabasini* (the female recluse, living in a forest), Mankumari promulgated the exercise of voluntary abnegation and piety.

However, the most remarkable defence of ascetic widowhood came from Girindramohini Dasi, in her collection of verses called *Ashrukana* (The Teardrops). Girindramohini, married at ten and widowed at twenty-six, addressed the 'woman question' of her time in quite a radical manner. *Sahitya Sadhak Charitamala*, a compilation of literary works of famous Bengali poets and authors, does not make any reference to her essays, but celebrates Girindramohini as a poet of tragedy and pathos.

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118 Ibid, 56-70.
119 Ibid, 41-54.
120 Basu, *Banabasini*.
122 Bandyopadhyay, *Sahitya Sadhak Charitamala*, 5.
According to these critics, the lyrical genius of Girindramohini is best expressed in her poetic works, reflecting the emotional bereavement and anguish of a Hindu widow.\footnote{Gupta, Banger Mahila Kabi, 71-72.} Chandranath Basu, one of the chief exponents of the Savitri ideology, hailed ‘Ashrukana’ (1887), which was a collection of poems like Upahar (The Gift), Tumi (You) and Purba-Chaya (The shadow of the past) as the reflection ‘of the soul of a noble Hindu woman’.\footnote{Ibid, 72.} Though Girindramohini ‘was never a serious housewife’, said her critics, she dedicated her life to the memory of her husband. In the words of the twentieth century commentator, ‘the mortal body of her husband may have left her, but his soul still dominated the widow’s existence—forming the backbone, the moral fibre of her poetry’.\footnote{Bandyopadhyay ed., Sakiya Sadhak Charitmala, 5, 10-11.} The twentieth century poet Saralabala Debi, also a child-widow, echoed a similar sadness in Shanti Mukul (Buds of Peace). Representing the emotional gloom of widowhood, verses like Tomar Sparsha (Your touch), Kothay Tumi (Where are you), Tomarei Chai (I want only you), Tumee Sab (You are everything) etc. conjured a poignant portrayal of widowhood.\footnote{Saralabala Debi, Santi-Mukul (Buds of peace), Amritalal Sen, Calcutta, 1921.}

In her autobiography, Kailashbasini Debi argued, since remarriage did not seem likely to receive social sanction, (practicing) chastity was the only way out for Indian widows. Moreover, she held satitva as the true virtue of a woman.\footnote{Kailashbasini Debi, ‘Janaika Grihabadhur Diaiy’ (The diary of a housewife), Atmakatha, 2, 35.} The famous widowed novelist of twentieth century Nirupama Debi proved the point of ascetic widowhood in her novelette Prayaschitta (Expiation).\footnote{Nirupama Debi, ‘Prayaschitta’ (Expiation), Aleya, Calcutta, 1917, 89-175, translation mine.} Widowed Niraja was given in marriage by her progressive father. The marriage, held under the influence of the Brahmo ideology, led to social ostracism and Mohit, Niraja’s second husband, was disinherited from his patrimony. Soon after, destiny took an ominous turn. The remarried woman, who was never sure about the legitimacy of her second marriage, was widowed again. Niraja, widowed twice, expiated the sin of others’ commission by embracing death.\footnote{Ibid.}

Writing in the 1930s, Giribala Debi displayed much caution in her novel, Hindu Meye (The Hindu’s daughter).\footnote{Giribala Debi, Hindu Meye (Hindu’s daughter), Barendra Library, Calcutta, 1930.} Widowed at the age of five, Mukulika was brought up
by her liberal parents who never told her about her early marriage and widowhood. Tension arose when Mukulika was attracted to her private tutor Asim. While her parents were ready to celebrate her remarriage, Mukulika on discovery of her earlier marriage and widowhood suffered a change of heart. She remembered the lost image of her dead husband and swore deathless devotion. In a volte-face, she donned the white apparel of the widow. Rejecting the remarriage option, she said, ‘I am a Hindu woman. I will remain so’. Asim was overawed by the vision of the ascetic icon. Mukulika was able to turn away from his attraction and her own desires by and through brahmacharya. Such a celebration of asceticism was, however, not without criticism. Kumudini Ghosh Jaya, a Congress activist from East Bengal, questioned the sexual double standard, by which a man could fornicate at his pleasure and marry several wives, and a widow was enjoined to undergo a ‘superhuman’ ordeal of sacrifice. Widowhood denigrated women, said Kumudini, robbing them of good food, good clothes, and stripped them of the spirit of life. The ideal of widow’s brahmacharya came under stronger scrutiny from the early twentieth century essayist, Anindita Debi. Reproving the ‘sacred rite of brahmacharya’, she wrote,

Like a thunder it looms over our head, we know not when it will strike. It is beyond our knowledge, whether any civilized race on earth has ever evolved, in such an ideal manner, a mechanism to terrify their women.

However hard cultural nationalism strove to locate the essence of brahmacharya within feminine nature, most widows failed to realize its spiritual implication. Already in the late nineteenth century, official records had indicated that the bulk of Calcutta’s prostitutes comprised Hindu widows. Not everybody shared such views. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, one of the major votaries of brahmacharya, directly challenged this official representation. Sarat Chandra argued from a self-conducted survey of prostitutes in Bengal, made during 1900-1901, that more married women than widows practiced prostitution. In his essay ‘Narir Mulya’ (Value of Women), he wrote that seventy per cent

131 Ibid, 190, 196, translation mine.
132 Ibid, 198.
133 Kumudini Ghosh Jaya, Bidhaba Bibaha, Apatti Khandan, (Widow Remarriage, Overruling the Objections), Satish Chandra Ghosh, Sirajgunge, 1926, 16-20.
of Bengali prostitutes were married women from low castes, who left their homes to escape marital torture and economic hardship, and not (as commonly believed) high caste Hindu widows. But official evidences proved this to be untrue. As the twentieth century progressed, increasing evidence confirmed the association between widowhood and prostitution.

**Devotion and Deviance: Widows as Prostitutes**

In late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal, the term prostitute could include any woman who offended established middle class conjugal regulations, or for that matter, any woman who violated the strict rules that governed ‘respectable’ appearance, manner and custom. The new conjugal/sexual morality, encapsulating a double standard, held frequent male sexual incursions outside the home as inevitable and natural, and condemned any act of female deviance as damaging to the home, family, society and nation.

The period after the 1860s witnessed in Victorian Britain a host of anxieties relating to ‘class, nation and Empire’ where the growth of prostitution raised the spectre of imperial decline. The prostitute, symbolizing vice and immorality, indicated the deterioration of the moral of the nation and heralded ‘the end of an empire’. By 1864-68, the implementation of the Contagious Diseases Act (Act XIV) by the British government in Britain and India coincided with a concern for the suppression of immorality in the colonial metropolis and especially, in the barracks. With a view of suppressing or mitigating the immoral vice, the law invested the police with the power to invade brothels, houses of ill-fame, and public streets where prostitutes were found soliciting.

During the early colonial period, prostitution, regarded as endemic to Indian society, was located within the general class/caste hierarchy. The nineteenth century crystallizing of a new idea of femininity marked a further step. As far as female behaviour was concerned, a rigid line was drawn between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’. This new

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demarcation was undoubtedly reinforced by the ascendance of a binary between the chaste and the unchaste woman, which began to permeate every aspect of the nationalist discourse on gender. The prostitute became gradually fixed in a space outside the social 'normal' as an outcast. In Bengal, the category of 'bad woman' included rich courtesans, *baijis, nauch* girls, Hindu high-caste widows, kulina unmarried girls, low-caste maids, working women, *Vaishnavis* and actresses of public theatre. All of them became commonly labelled as prostitutes.\textsuperscript{137} While 'devotion', 'chastity' and 'virtue' became the benign characteristics of the 'good woman', a single act of lapse from the established code of behaviour was taken as a total abrogation of femininity and a fall from virtue. The Victorian imagery of the 'fall' also entered indigenous Bengali discourse and the term 'pattita' was applied to a prostitute.\textsuperscript{138} This complex formulation boiled down to a simple formula when translated into physical signs—in daily habits, conduct, dress and speech. The *bhadramahila* was 'shy, silent ... totally undemanding, stays away from men, keeps her whole body covered'... and the *beshya*, in contrast, was loudmouthed, always restless, bares special parts of the body and falls on men.\textsuperscript{139}

In the city of Calcutta, contemporary official sources had identified three categories of prostitutes. In Sumanta Banerjee's analysis, the abducted high caste child widows or seduced kulina wives represented the first generation of prostitutes who thronged the brothels of Calcutta during the mid-nineteenth century. The second group comprised lower caste women who took up prostitution in the next decade.\textsuperscript{140} A third group included Hindu and Muslim dancers who entertained all kinds of customers irrespective of their caste and religion.\textsuperscript{141} One 1872 report showed that the majority of Calcutta's prostitutes were from low castes like, 'Tanti, Mali, Yogi, Kumor, Kamar, Chamar, Sonar bene, Teli, Jele, Kaibarta, Bede, Goala, Napit, etc'.\textsuperscript{142} In a contemporary woman's magazine, *Mahila*, a classification was made between three kinds of prostitutes.

\textsuperscript{137} Chatterjee 'The Queen's Daughters', 19 -26.  
\textsuperscript{138} Sen, 'Motherhood and Mother Craft'; Banerjee, *The Parlour and The Streets*.  
\textsuperscript{139} Anonymous, *Stridiger Prati Upadesh* (Advice to women), Calcutta, 1874, Cited in Chatterjee, 'The Queen's Daughters', 28.  
\textsuperscript{141} WBSA, Home-Public, 20 February 1869, Despatch from Dr. C. Fabre Tonnerre, Health Officer to Stuart Hogg, Esq. Chairman of the Justices of Peace for the Town of Calcutta, 16 September 1867, 112-115, cited in Banerjee, ibid.  
\textsuperscript{142} WBSA, Home - Judicial, 156, 17 October 1872, cited in Banerjee, ibid.
While the first category comprised a respectable class of women, the second included women born to prostitutes. The last group was those who were forcibly brought to this occupation through immoral trafficking. While the three upper castes—Brahmans, Vaidyas, and Kayasthas—were few in number, lower caste women predominated among the ranks of prostitutes.\footnote{Mahila, 16, Sravan 1924, 511.}

Official evidences indicated the existence of a large number of Hindu widows among both urban and rural prostitutes. It was believed that after the abolition of Sati, widows were spared their lives and compelled to live as burdens on their families. Forced into heavy, manual housework, they sought routes of escape. Prostitution was often the only avenue of independent earnings open to them. This state of things led the British administrator, A. Mackenzy, to point out that, 'In Bengal the prostitute class seems to be chiefly recruited from the ranks of Hindu widows'.\footnote{WBSA Home- Judicial, 5829, Calcutta, 17 October 1872, cited in Chatterjee, 'The Queen's Daughters', 24.}

An official survey in different districts of Bengal revealed that the bulk of the prostitutes were comprised of widows. The Commissioner of Dacca pointed out that widows finding their solitary life unbearable, ‘turned prostitutes openly’. He admitted that even after the Widow Remarriage Act, civil law was powerless to find husbands for widows. The path of asceticism and rigorous \textit{brahmacharya} was rarely followed and the dangers of rape and seduction were great. In case of accidents like abortion or infanticide, high-caste widows had to seek shelter in brothels.\footnote{Ibid.}

The novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, in his official capacity as the Deputy Magistrate of Berhampore in Murshidabad, also agreed that, ‘the Bengali women who might end up as prostitutes are mostly widows and middle class women who voluntarily adopted a prostitute’s life’.\footnote{WBSA Judicial - Judicial, Proceedings B 252-279, October 1872.}

According to Bankim, high-caste Hindu women were particularly vulnerable to seduction, domestic misery and ‘ennui’ or a love of excitement, which made them desert their homes. An official enquiry into the methods of recruitment of prostitutes revealed that destitute widows often sold young girls to pimps\footnote{Ratnabali Chatterjee, 'The Unknown Bankim', Unpublished Paper.}.

\footnote{Mahila, 16, Sravan 1924, 511.}
\footnote{WBSA Home- Judicial, 5829, Calcutta, 17 October 1872, cited in Chatterjee, 'The Queen's Daughters', 24.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{WBSA Judicial - Judicial, Proceedings B 252-279, October 1872.}
\footnote{Ratnabali Chatterjee, 'The Unknown Bankim', Unpublished Paper.}
and prostitutes. Kashikinkar Sen, Deputy Magistrate of Rajshahi, maintained in his report, 'old widows sometimes became bostomis and sold girls to the prostitutes'. In late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal, bostomis or Vaishnavis were considered to be 'semi-prostitutes'. Belonging to the popular religious order propagated by the medieval reformer Sri Chaityana, they were ill reputed for their loose morals. They usually dispensed with the formal system of marriage and family and lived in small settlements called akhras. High caste Hindu widows, who were ostracised from society for sexual lapses, often converted to Vaishnavism and took shelter in these akhras as bostomis.

These observations were not at variance with the opinion of reformist Bengali intellectuals. Several representations in contemporary manuals and journals shared the concern over the pathetic plight of orphaned child widows who found it hard to overcome seduction, temptation and enticements and were swept through the path of infamy. Bidhaba Bisam Bipad (Widows Great Danger), a polemical play, published in August 1856, a month after the passage of the Widow Remarriage Act, portrayed high caste widows as prostitutes. The play detailed the sexual exploitation of young widows by their male kin, leading to incest, abortions and unnatural deaths. Antahpur, a contemporary journal, reported an incident where a young widow of sixteen was seduced by one of her male relations, and was eventually thrown out of her family. She was left with no other option but to take to prostitution. Articles in contemporary magazines attributed clandestine prostitution and abortions to the increasing number of child widows, who quite impulsively 'fell prey to their animal instincts'.

The rapid increase in prostitution was also seen as an end result of commercialization and marginalization of traditional economic sectors. The decline in women’s traditional occupations meant that widows were often without any means of subsistence. Some of these widows were forced to migrate to the towns to seek jobs. Cities and towns offered a range of skilled and unskilled occupations, but very few of

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148 WBSA, Judicial-Judicial, ibid.
149 See, Chatterjee, 'The Queen's Daughters'.
150 Anonymous, Bidhaba Bisam Bipad (Widows, Great Danger).
them were open to women, who were without any proficiency and means. Moreover, the urban world was a male one with only one woman to every eleven men. As a negative fall-out of urbanisation, prostitution was pressed as the ultimate choice for an unprotected woman. In addition, women were invariably paid lower wages than men on the assumption that men subsidized women’s wages. Since widows had no such subsidy forthcoming from ‘family’ sources, they were forced into seeking them from ‘non-family’ sources. 153

By the end of the century, official and indigenous tracts established a very specific link between widowhood and prostitution. During 1886-87, the *Memorial of the Calcutta Missionary Conference*, which aimed at the suppression of brothels, drew attention to the unprotected state of all unmarried girls and widows over ten years of age. The memorial asked for an amendment of the Penal Code to raise the age of protection for unmarried girls and widows from ten to eighteen. It pushed for similar amendments of the Police, Municipality and Vagrancy Acts in the interests of public morality and social order, so as to secure the protection of female minors from entering the practice of prostitution. 154

In 1923, an inquiry into the question of prostitution revealed that ‘among the Brahmins, widows seldom remarried and they frequently became prostitutes being young.’ 155 Since child-marriage led ultimately to early widowhood in Bengal, many women had to lead a precarious existence throughout their lives. Sometimes economic hardship and sexual temptation prompted them to join brothels. In 1929, another government inquiry pointed out that traffickers recruited young widows from provinces and villages, and sent them to towns.

Since the early nineteenth century, illicit pregnancies and recurring cases of infanticides attracted the attention of the indigenous male reformers. Back in the 1840s, Babu Motilal Seal of Calcutta had decided to spend one lac rupees to set up a hospital for pregnant widows. His ‘open-handedness’, however, came under scathing criticism as the indigenous male elite refused to promote the ‘illegitimate’ pregnancies of widows, by

154 WBSA, Judicial-Police, November 1887, File 247-10, 11, 151-152, 153-55.
setting up a charitable hospital. However, the *Widows' Home* in Poona, established by Jotirao Phuley, gave admission to pregnant widows. But most of the babies born of widows died from injuries done to them while in the womb by poisonous drugs, which widowed mothers had taken to conceal their pregnancies.

In 1880-81, in a village called Olpad in Maharashtra, a local policeman heard rumours that a young Brahmin widow Vijaylakshmi was pregnant. In March 1881, when the body of a new-born was found in the rubbish heap, the widow was brought before the second-class magistrate in Surat. She confessed that she gave birth to the child and killed it by cutting its throat with a cooking implement. The case created a huge uproar across the nation, as a month later the widow Vijaylakshmi, found guilty of infanticide, was sentenced to deportation.

In another startling incident in 1929, Saralamoni Dasi, a 22-year-old Hindu widow, reportedly killed her eleven-month-old child by poisoning him with opium. Saralamoni, married before puberty and widowed at the age of eight, was reportedly seduced by a man, and gave birth to a child. When the man deserted her, she was left with no other option but to kill the infant to hide the ignominy of illegitimate pregnancy. When Saralamoni was brought to the court, the majority verdict of the jury went against her and sentenced her to deportation for life. While the session judge was under the impression that the widow acted under temporary aberration of mind, the High Court, on an appeal, reduced the sentence to an imprisonment for five years.

From the early nineteenth century, even as reformers furnished evidence of illicit sexual liaisons by widows, the government made abortions and foeticides a crime, subject to penal action. In some parts of India, family members murdered a pregnant widow to prevent a scandal. Uma Chakravarti argues that there was a social sanction for the killing of 'fallen' widows, and the male kin of the late husband were usually involved in such murder.

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155 WBSA, Political - Police, proceeding 2A-4, June 1923, 20-23.
156 Jnananeswan, 22 February 1840, reproduced in *Sambodpatre Sekaler Katha*, 325-326.
157 Gidunial, *Status of Women*, LXXVIII.
The indigenous elite strenuously opposed any legislation, which could set up the colonial state as an external monitor of widows' sexuality. In 1860-61, a routine medical investigation into the concealment of pregnancies by widows by the colonial government produced a great furore in Bengal. The Hindu Patriot broke a story that in the remote villages of Burdwan, when it was suspected that a widow was pregnant, she was summoned to the local thana and was physically examined before the medical surgeon to ascertain the truth. The law against abortions enabled the local gomosthas, police and headmen to carry out an enquiry. The male intelligentsia protested vociferously against such administrative actions that interfered with their own right of sexual surveillance of widows.\textsuperscript{161} Bengali society demanded stringent action against the police, as the indignity and actual injury suffered by the widows was incalculable. W.S. Seton-Karr, the officiating Secretary to the Bengal Government, admitted the 'absolute illegality' of the police action as laws against abortions made no provision for 'investigation' in such an intrusive manner.\textsuperscript{162}

By the twentieth century the Bengali middle classes were developing a new sensibility that prompted a new way of decoupling widowhood and prostitution. In the early nineteenth century, the term rahr was used interchangeably to describe both widows and prostitutes to signify the sexual availability of the former. This old connection had to be broken. At least in ideal terms, brahmacharya was to allow widows a way of distancing themselves from the stereotype of the promiscuous women and earning a respectable status through celibacy. The bidhaba, the ideal widow, who denounced all earthly and sensual pleasures in the memory of her husband, was to be separated from the beshya or the prostitute, the unchaste woman who traded her sexual favours. Operating completely outside the pale of respectable society, the beshya, thus, came to symbolize transgressive womanhood. While the social space, outside the home and the family, was the stamping ground of prostitutes, the bidhaba could hope to lay claim to the domain of the home, the only legitimate space for women.

Although the occasion of a radical opening up of the 'woman question' seemed firmly closed towards the end of the century, anxieties about the construction of an ideal

\textsuperscript{161} WBSA, Judicial-Police, February 1861, and April 1861,76-78, 327-328.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
femininity continued to beset the middle class elite throughout the twentieth century. *Brahmacharya* was perhaps the only possible ‘solution’ available to the male elite, who by rejecting remarriage of widows could not yet repudiate the sufferings involved in ascetic observances of widowhood. Even when nationalism sought to weed out old anxieties about female sexuality, it failed to offer any lasting ‘resolution’ to the *widow problem*.

**Conclusion:**

The rise of nationalism eliminated chances of remarriage as a ‘solution’ to the *widow problem*. The discourses on the status of women, which began with the colonial-missionary critiques and continued throughout the reformist period, were finally settled by the nationalist determination to protect home, family and women from the colonial onslaught of social reform. The irrevocable sacrament of marriage and deathless conjugal devotion became vital components for regulating women—both wives and widows. In the struggles of the nascent nation, the only space left for a widow was that of a perfect and powerful *brahmacharini* along with the paramount feminine ideal of a faithful wife. The widow’s impeccable sexual morality, chastity and fidelity became the key to the self-realisation of the nation, and *brahmacharya* became a dynamic concept open to myriad redefinitions.

Though glorified in laudatory terms, *brahmacharya* did not always guarantee the widow’s ‘sexual death’. The image of the *brahmacharini* widow—pure, serene and unadorned—was at constant war with other images of deprivation, destitution and a ‘descent into vice’. The widow acquired a dual image—either that of a *brahmacharini*, a figure of faultless purity, or that of the sexual anarchist, victim of her own unruly passions. It was the intensity and variety of these images that underlined the paradox of the widow in Hindu society.

Throughout the late nineteenth century, attempts were being made by cultural nationalists to build up *brahmacharya* as an impregnable defence around the body of the widow to check her sexual transgressions. Rigid contours were drawn between modes of continence and incontinence, along with a crystallization of the idea of irrevocable and monogamous marriage. The woman, who transgressed the code of marriage and flouted
the terms of conjugality, and the widow who failed to comply with ideals of *brahmacharya*, were branded as seductresses and prostitutes.

*Brahmacharya*, which located the unchanging spiritual essence of the nation in the image of the ethnicized Hindu woman, might have achieved a nationalist 'resolution'. But this 'resolution' required widows to be pushed to fringes of patriarchal, *brahminic* society. They could retain their social status and a foothold in the family, only through incessant drudge rendered in service to the family. They had to accept various kinds of social humiliation through disinheritance and destitution. They had to adopt a régime of self-abnegation, rigid mortification and compulsory sacrifice in the name of *brahmacharya*. 