Preface

The present study on ‘Widows And Widowhood In The Colonial Punjab’ has focused attention on widows as a social category in the region. The basic thrust was to cover a wide range of aspects including the numbers and distribution; social situation and aspects of succession of widows; options regarding remarriage of child widows; actions taken for widows to assert their rights in colonial Punjab and the position of custom and state with reference to widows. This attempt to study widowhood in some depth adds to our understanding of the social history of the colonial Punjab in a wider perspective and to history in general giving us a better picture of the past.

The period from 1849 to 1947 witnessed a major transformation in Punjabi society with changes in administration, law and policies under the British Raj. A general Code for Tribal Customs was prepared by the Settlement officers and recorded as Punjab Customary Law, which became the first rule of decision on civil matters like succession, alienation, marriage, adoption etc. without damaging the framework of the agricultural class. The contradictory customs and attitudes towards widows underlines that in the Punjab, marriage was an economic necessity. This led on the one hand to the ‘high’ status for women reflected in bride price and widow’s remarriage. On the other hand, it ensured institutional subjugation of the women in the patriarchal structure through female infanticide, purdah, prejudice against female education and Karewa. The widows were thus, situated in a complex web. The new Punjabi elite and rise of the British rule supported the ideal of Pativarta, acknowledged by their writings in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. With these ideas, they tried to tackle the various problems relating to widowhood, but largely of the high caste widows. The attitude of British officials in the context of widows was different in the Punjab as compared to the rest of India.

The study has investigated the different aspects of the problem to understand and to deal with the issues confronted by widows in the region. A coherent picture, which emerges after the analysis and interpretations of data available in primary sources, has been considered.

The political and socio-cultural concerns of India especially came to be reflected in the writings of the 18-19th century, especially in Bengal and Maharashtra. One of the common themes of these writings was the miserable
The commanding presence of missionary felt in the colonial period had also raised this issue in their critique of Indian society. Alarmed by this situation, many reform movements became active in bringing about changes in society. The educated elite was specially concerned with the proper perception and understanding of this issue and debated it strongly which in turn inspired them to favor widow marriage themselves and catered more to the needs of the different communities in colonial India.

The practical distinction between India and Punjab was much more pronounced on this matter. Probably many Punjabis believed that the issue of widow and widowhood was not an important issue. The Punjabis had remained aloof from the contemporary idea of ‘enforced widowhood’ due to their different customs and practices in most castes. No doubt, the situation had changed with the arrival of the colonial power. It encouraged missionary activities, which took up the question of high caste widows. The challenge to indigenous faiths, posed by colonialism and missionary activities provoked the formation of a multitude of socio-religious reform movements in the colonial Punjab. The cause of the widow became an important aspect of the agenda of these organizations and resulted in several continuity and changes in the concept of widowhood in the region.

There are several works, which have contributed in different ways to an understanding of this social problem. These books provide adequate attention to the various aspects of widowhood. We can broadly place them into two categories, the work related to widows in India and books and articles on the different aspect of widowhood in the Punjab and Haryana areas. In the first category are books like Ajit Kumar Ray, *Widows Are Not for Burning*, 1985; H.V. Nagesh, P.S. Nair, A.P Katti, *Widowhood In India*, 1988; Martha Alter Chen (ed.), *Widows In India, Social Neglect And Public Action*, 1998; Eunice De Souza and Lindsay Pereira, *Women’s Voices*, 2002; Jorg Fisch, *Immolating Women*, 2005; Lucy Carrol, ‘Law Custom And Statutory Social Reform: The Hindu Widow’s Remarriage Act Of 1856’ in *Women In Colonial India* (ed.) by J. Krishnamurthy, 1999. These writings add to our understanding of some aspects of widowhood, such as widow-burning, perception of widowhood in different communities, problems of widows, changing attitude of educated women towards widowhood and prevailing laws regarding widows. The limitation is that information is either general or of this some part of India, but not of
the Punjab region. However, the concepts and perspectives can be usefully applied to all studies on the theme.

The work on the Punjab region is somewhat less in volume. Some general social histories like G.S. Chhabra, *Social And Economic History Of Punjab, 1849-1901*, 1962; B.S. Saini, *The Social And Economic History Of The Punjab, 1901-1939, Including Haryana And Himachal Pardesh*, 1975, provide brief reference to widows in the Punjab region. There are some works on the Punjab, which have made several significant points with regard to widows such as that of Paras Diwan, *Customary law Of Punjab And Haryana*, 1978; Prem Chowdhry, *The Veiled Women, Shifting Gender Equations In Rural Haryana, 1880-1990*, 1994; Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, Caste And Religious Identities, Restructuring Class In Colonial Punjab*, 2002; Prem Chowdhry ‘Customs In A Peasant Economy, Women In Colonial Haryana’ in *Recasting Women* (ed.) by Kumnuk Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, 1989; Prem Chowdhry ‘Widow Remarriage In Haryana, Past And Present’ in *From The Seams Of History, Essays On Indian Women* (ed.) by Bharati Roy, 1995. These works draw attention on the coverage of judgments as instances to prove the customary laws, new notion of ascetic widowhood, rural ideology and culture, popular perceptions for widow remarriage. However, all categories of widows remained neglected. Some of these studies focused only on the south east Punjab and on some issues of widowhood only. An overview on the status of widows and widowhood in the Punjab region is however, still lacking and leaves a vacuum in the understanding of a social history of the Punjab.

Very little is known, about the extent and situation of widows in a socio-cultural context in relation to the Punjab. To understand it fully, the numerical strength of the widows has been taken in a comparative framework. In spite of their considerable numbers, widows were socially marginalized. The present research covers the various practices that legitimized the subjugation or freedom of Punjabi widows of different strata in the cultural context and the resultant resistance by reformers and changes by the State.

The purpose of this study is to delineate the changes as reflected in social customs and practices regarding widowhood. It aims at achieving a better understanding of the widow in social and economic dimension. The attitude of the society towards widows is worthwhile to be analyzed because of their considerable variations in Punjab. There is a wide divergence between castes and tribal and even
between the situations of sub-regions. An attempt is made to explore the British perspective regarding widows and the reasons behind the liberal attitude for widow remarriage in Punjab. This study seeks to investigate the different aspects of the problem regarding widows and widowhood, to create a more coherent picture of the past and a deeper understanding of the social context.

To understand this subject, the study has been divided into seven main chapters. The introductory chapter, ‘The Historical Context’, deals with the changing status of widows in India during the colonial period. This chapter enables us to appreciate correctly the theory and practices of widowhood and the perspectives adopted for them in the different parts of the country, as represented in the writings of the 19th and 20th century on widows and widowhood. This serves as a comparative basis for the study on the Punjab region.

The second chapter ‘Social Situation Of Widows’ focuses on the proportion of widows in the Punjab in relation to the total population, religion, caste and location in the region in a comparative framework. The number of widows was influenced by social practices, norms and customs that prevailed in Punjabi society. Theoretically, the position of widows was considered in direct contrast to India, where the directions of patriarchy shaped the ethical and social values regarding widowhood. As the masses of peasant women in the Punjab did not observe the concept of ‘ascetic widowhood’. Practically, they were expected to take their devar as their husband. ‘Forced Karewa’ was rigorously observed in this section of the society. The Hindu law, which forbade the remarriage of widows, was observed in the Punjab only among certain castes or tribes for their social status.

The rule of succession to widows, influenced by the social customs and legal hurdles, is examined in the third chapter, ‘Inheritance By Widows’. There was no uniform pattern regarding their property rights as attested by the customary law and its practices. As the nature of property rights were understood different, but in different regions and among the variety of social groups under the prevailing customary law examined in the chapter.

The child widows, who posed a ‘challenge’ to society at large, are examined in the fourth chapter. The seriousness of this problem and its continuation could be understood by this fact that early marriage, which was common, was also the cause for early widowhood. The chapter takes into account the number and distribution of child widows in different parts of the Punjab, in comparison to British India; the age
structure of child widow, the religious and caste background and factors responsible for the practice of child marriage.

The ‘Issues Of Remarriage’, in Punjab, has taken in the fifth chapter. The general opinion in India was not to observe the custom of remarriage enforced by the Dharmsastra. In Punjab, except some higher castes, most groups practiced widow marriage. The chapter also takes up such as customs regarding remarriages such as Karewa, Karao, Chadaran dazi, Chaddar-Pana, Rakhewa, Rikhorar and Heri-Hui, prevalent in Punjab. There was different ceremonies and ritual for marriages of widowed in different regions. The chapter further looks at the issue of reforms and the conscious attempt to provide an answer to the problem of high caste widows. Generally, the practice of remarriage was common, influenced by many factors such as deficiency of women, widow sufferings, high proportion of widowers, bride-price, polyandry, debt, and above all the importance to custom with no prejudice against widow remarriage.

The sixth chapter focuses on the work of social reformers for widows and provides information about the modern Punjabi voluntary associations called Sabhas or Samajes to tackle the problem of widowhood, throughout the Punjab. In the Punjab, this first happened, mostly in Lahore, from where the different movements then spread their message to different areas in the Punjab, especially in the urban areas. The socio-cultural concerns of Punjabis, however, especially came to be reflected in their journalistic activities. The ‘Print culture’ definitely influenced the orthodox ideas, to some extent, as in 1890’s we witness the start of matrimonial advertisement for widows in Tribune. They were able to get support the causes of widows simply by their managing, writing or preaching activities.

The seventh chapter, ‘Widows And The State’, focuses on the social transformation in the Punjab under colonial rule and by the new legal system. It underlines that British had marginalized widows by supporting the agnatic theory. The widows were not generally entitled to claim partition of land, whether she demanded it as a right of alienation or gift. The British used discretionary powers to interpret the prevailing customs in that region. They supported the customs with a series of judicial decisions, and intervened in the customary position of widows. The agricultural economy and recruitment of soldiers seemingly justified the stand of the British in Punjab.

The conclusion, an overview of the research is presented.