

# Widowhood in Nineteenth Century Bengal: A Review of its Agony and Redressal

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## Abstract

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The widows were harshly dealt with in pre-Plassey Bengali society. Their rights and opportunities were severely restricted. Caste Hindu women could not remarry, and their presence in auspicious ceremonies was considered undesirable. The orthodox Hindus burned the widows with their dead husbands. On account of irrational and strict marriage rules, society was overcrowded with mature widows, unmarried women, and confirmed bachelors. Adultery, unwanted pregnancy, and covert abortion were rampant. In the nineteenth century, social reform efforts aimed at widows were insufficient. Severe hardships in society led the widows to seek refuge in Vaishnavite *akhras*, Muhammadanism, or brothels.

**Keywords:** Widow, Hardship, Immorality, Reformation, Redressal

## Introduction

The most ignominious chapter of Bengali society in the eighteenth century was the suffering of women and the social indignity inflicted on them. The women enjoyed neither freedom nor any right or privilege. Their status in society was so deplorable that nearly all the significant efforts regarding social reform in the nineteenth century were centred around them. These social reform initiatives were diametrically opposed to society's long-held norms. From their birth until their death, the rights and dignity of a woman were neglected by her parents, husband, children, and the state. Women had no recourse against discrimination and oppression and were forced to accept various forms of neglect and persecution. The policies of the government until the eighteenth century were adopted on the basis of the religious scriptures. The orthodox society severely criticised any violation of social restrictions imposed on women and asked for atonement for the

omission or commission of any breach. Among the women, the widows were the worst sufferers. Several restrictions were placed on them regarding their way of life and they were outraged in many ways. They had to follow the society's strict rules, which had been in place in Bengal for centuries. The widows would pay a high price if they violated any of the social restrictions imposed on them. This paper explores the gravity of the deplorable social condition of widows in Bengal in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the efforts of Bengali intellectuals to redress their hardships with the cooperation of some British humanists serving as civil servants in British India in the nineteenth century.

This research work has been conducted mainly by using primary sources. Secondary sources have also been used in the research to some limited extent. The original works accomplished by scholars on the condition of women have also been consulted in order to develop an idea about the socio-economic profile of widows until the nineteenth century. Some valuable research has already been produced by celebrated historians discussing the topic from different perspectives. In this research study, religious texts, literary sources, accounts of foreign travelers, records of Christian missionaries, newspaper reports, official correspondence of British civil servants, and government reports have been taken as the major primary sources. The importance of this study will never be without its limitations. Nevertheless, it will add some new elements to the existing knowledge of the social history of colonial Bengal.

Indian women have been forced to live under the male members of their families since ancient times. They have never received social recognition for their independent lives and livelihoods. Manu writes: "Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence."<sup>1</sup> In the eighteenth century, women had to work hard at home. They were expected to clean, cook, wash, husk, and pound grains; fetch water from its sources; care for children; and assist the male members of the family in all household tasks. Going outside the family for work was considered an act of dishonor. The poor and helpless widows would suffer greatly from poverty-related distresses as a result of discouraging women's independent economic activity outside the family.

*Pardah*, or women's seclusion, was a significant feature of Bengali society. There was a deep prejudice against girls' education. It was believed that an educated woman would inevitably become a widow. The parents of the girls would arrange the marriage of their daughters in their early ages, and very few parents would think about the necessity of education for their daughters. Marriage was considered

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<sup>1</sup> Manu: *The Laws of Manu* (Translated by G. Buhler) in *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XXV., F. Max Muller (ed.). Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1886, IX, 3, p.328.

an essential, irrevocable, and religious sacrament among the Hindus. Giving daughters away for marriage at a young age is an ancient Indian custom. The practice of child marriage of girls in India has been referred to not only in contemporary literature but also by foreign writers like Craufurd, Craufurd, and Bolts. Regarding the marriage of a girl child in eighteenth-century India, Craufurd observed:

“The Hindus are so scrupulous with respect to the virginity of their brides, that they marry extremely young, although consummation is deferred till the parties arrive at the age of puberty; nor will they marry a person with whom those symptoms have already appeared to which the sex is subject.”<sup>2</sup>

Historically, lower-caste Hindus did not strictly adhere to Brahmanical rules regarding the early marriage of their daughters. In most cases, and for several reasons, the husband would die before his wife, resulting in a large number of young widows in society.

In mediaeval Bengal, there was a tradition among the affluent families to keep multiple wives. It was considered fortunate for a wealthy man’s wives to have a couple of co-wives.<sup>3</sup> This tradition continued until the nineteenth century. As a matter of fact, polygamy was a practice approved by Hindu society during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Krishnakanta Nandi, the *zamindar* of Cossimbazar, had more than one wife simultaneously.<sup>4</sup> Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the father of modern India, married three times to satisfy the wishes of his father.<sup>5</sup> The higher classes of Muslims also practised polygamy to show off their wealth and influence. But the ordinary men in Bengal practised monogamy. Regarding marriage practices prevailing in Bengal in the latter half of the eighteenth century, Stavorinus observed:

“The Bengalese marry no more than one wife, except the brahmins, who take as many as they choose, or can maintain; yet if the wife of one of another caste be barren, and he have money enough to support her, he is

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<sup>2</sup> Q. Craufurd: *Sketches chiefly relating to the History, Religion, Learning, and Manners, of the Hindoos*, Vol. II. London, T. Cadell in the Strand, 1792, p.2.

<sup>3</sup> *Sei nari bhagyabati, dhanaban jar pati, bibaha koroye dui tin*. Kaliprasanna Badyopadhyay: *Madhyajuge Bangla* (in Bengali). Kolkata, Gurudas Chattopadhyay & Sons, 1330 B.S., p.248.

<sup>4</sup> Kantababu married Anangamanjari of Kurumba, a village in north Burdwan, for the second time in 1780. Soumendra Chandra Nandy: *Life and Times of Cantoo Babu (Krishna Kanta Nandy): The Banian of Warren Hastings 1742-1804*, Vol. I. Calcutta, Allied Publishers, 1978, p.492.

<sup>5</sup> Gulam Murshid: *Hajar Bachharer Bangali Sanskriti* (in Bengali). Dhaka, Abasar Prakashana Sanstha, 2008), p.218.

allowed by the brahmins, upon payment of a certain sum, and the distribution of some alms, to take a second wife, in addition to the first.”<sup>6</sup>

In those days, the vast majority of the peasants, artisans, and craftsmen were crippled by poverty and poverty-related distress. Monogamy was the rule for them. Poverty acted as a check on polygamy, and the poor rarely had more than one wife.<sup>7</sup> In the twelfth century, Ballal Sen, the king of Bengal, restructured Hindu society into different classes and introduced the practice of *Kulinism*.<sup>8</sup> Different *Kulin* groups were assigned different social orders according to the customs of *Kulinism*. It was also ruled that members belonging to any specific group of *Kulins* could marry only the daughters belonging to some specific *Kulin* families. Under the compulsion of *Kulinism*, sometimes little boys married older women, and sometimes little girls were married to older men.<sup>9</sup> There is no doubt that polygamy was an inevitable consequence of *Kulinism*.

In the eighteenth century, the life of a woman became painful after the death of her husband. During their widowhood, the women were forced to undergo spiteful treatment by their in-laws and indifference from the members of their parental side. The orthodox Hindu society could not even think about the widow's remarriage and remarriage of widows was strictly forbidden among them. Fei Hsin, the Chinese official who came to Bengal in the fifteenth century, recorded that when a husband had died in Bengal, his widow could not remarry.<sup>10</sup> However, widow remarriage was not prohibited among the Muslims. The lower caste Hindus like the Namasudras (Chandals), Rajbansis, barbers, washermen, fishermen, and shoemakers practised widow remarriage, though in limited numbers.<sup>11</sup>

If the wife of a man died, the widower was allowed to marry again, and in certain cases, his relatives encouraged him to remarry. A Hindu male, upon becoming a

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<sup>6</sup> John Splinter Stavorinus: *Voyages to the East-Indies* (Translated from original Dutch by Samuel Hull Wilcocke), Vol. I. London, G.G. and J. Robinson, 1798, p.440.

<sup>7</sup> W.W. Hunter: *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. VI. London, Trubner & Co., 1876, p.282.

<sup>8</sup> Ananda Bhatta: *Vallala Charita* (Translated into English & edited by Haraprasad Sastri). Calcutta, Hare Press, 1901, pp.8-12.

<sup>9</sup> J. Westland: *A Report on the District of Jessore, its Antiquities, its History, and its Commerce*. Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Office, 1871, p.280.

<sup>10</sup> Fei Hsin: *Hsing-Ch'a Sheng-Lan (The Overall Survey of the Star Raft)* [Translated by J.V.G. Mills]. Wiesbaden, 1996, p.76.

<sup>11</sup> W.W. Hunter, *op. cit.* (Vol. VI.), p.282; Arthur Coulton Hartley: *Final Report of the Rangpur Survey and Settlement Operations 1931-1938*. Alipore, Bengal Government Press, 1940, para.21, p.12.

widower, could find himself in almost the same status as a bachelor.<sup>12</sup> After remarriage, the widower could again lead a normal conjugal life. But the widow of a Brahmin could not remarry.<sup>13</sup> Widow remarriage was also forbidden among the other orthodox Hindus. The position of the widow in the family suddenly became shocking after the death of her husband. George Forster has observed on the position of the widows in the family: “On all occasions, after the husband’s death, the widow is classed in the house as a slave or a menial servant.”<sup>14</sup>

A widow was forbidden to use perfume or wear ornaments. She had to give up eating fish, flesh, or butter and live on plain barley or wheaten bread. She was allowed to eat only once a day.<sup>15</sup> A woman was declared “widow” some days after the death of her husband by a particular ceremony. The female relatives of the woman cut the thread suspending an ornament that symbolized her marriage. After cutting the thread, the widow had to shave her hair in order to join the despised class of widows.<sup>16</sup> An upper-caste Hindu widow could be easily identified because of her dress and shaved head. She was required to make a pilgrimage to some of the sacred places of the Hindus, like Benares, Prayag, Gaya, etc. She appropriated her property for charitable uses in those holy places and offered up a sacrifice of her hair to the memory of her deceased husband.<sup>17</sup> When a woman became a widow, she was usually sent back to her parents’ house. The Hindu widows were compelled to live in the families of their brothers, with utmost penance and misery, almost like slaves. The hardships imposed on upper caste Hindu widows were so severe that strong-willed women frequently preferred to burn themselves on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands. A section of the widows renounced their caste and sought refuge in brothels in order to escape these harsh regulations.<sup>18</sup>

In Hindu society, a woman had to maintain strict personal chastity. The caste Hindu women were required to relinquish their widowhood by way of burning themselves alive on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands. Very often, a widow was forced to become a *Sati* by burning herself on her late husband’s funeral pyre. The Muslim rulers of India, at times, discouraged the *Sati* rites. On one occasion,

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<sup>12</sup> Abbe J.A. Dubois: *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (Translated from French by Henry K. Beauchamp). Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1905, p.205.

<sup>13</sup> . *Ibid*, p.210.

<sup>14</sup> . George Forster: *Journey from Bengal to London*, Vol. I. London, R. Faulder, 1798, p.57.

<sup>15</sup> . *Ibid*, p.58.

<sup>16</sup> . Abbe J.A. Dubois: *A Description of the Character, Manners, and Customs of the People of India*. Madras, J. Higginbotham, 1862, p.166.

<sup>17</sup> . George Forster, *op. cit.*, p.58.

<sup>18</sup> . Walter Hamilton: *The East-India Gazetteer*, Vol. I. London, Parbury, Allen, and Co., 1828, p.205.

Emperor Akbar himself rescued a widow from the funeral pyre of her dead husband and saved her life. But the Muslim rulers could not prohibit this brutal custom.<sup>19</sup> In the seventeenth century, French physician, Bernier witnessed the burning of *Satis* in different parts of India.<sup>20</sup> During the rule of Alivardi Khan, we have an instance of voluntary self-immolation on the husband's funeral pyre in Murshidabad in 1743. The *Sati* was the widow of a Mahratta Brahmin, Ram Chand Pandit, and her age was only seventeen years. The Muslims of Bengal did not glorify the act of *Sati* among them. Nonetheless, isolated cases of *Sati* practice among Muslims have been discovered. It was reported in the Calcutta Gazette of July 29, 1790, that a Muhammadan lady buried herself alive with the corpse of her husband.<sup>21</sup>

In the eighteenth century, a serious social crisis emerged in Bengal. On the one hand, a large number of young females, consisting of widows and women deserted by their husbands, existed in society. On the other hand, almost a similar number of potential unmarried males existed in the same society because they were not able to get marriageable girls for them. As a result, immoral relations developed in society. A section of society's persecuted young, unmarried daughters and widows eventually found refuge in brothels. Mukundarama has depicted an excellent illustration of the prevalence of prostitutes in the markets in search of their clients.<sup>22</sup> Calcutta became the most populous abode of prostitutes in the eighteenth century. Calcutta's bad reputation stemmed from the town's large population of professional prostitutes at the end of the eighteenth century. The nuisance caused by Calcutta's prostitutes became a maxim in Western India.<sup>23</sup>

Under the impact of Western education and with the contact of European culture, a group of educated Bengalis realised the futility of their society's bad practices, superstitions, and blind faith. At this historic juncture, some liberal-minded Bengalis felt the inhuman sufferings of the Hindu widows on account of child marriage, *Kulinism*, polygamy, *Sati* practice, and the perpetuity of widowhood. In

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<sup>19</sup> . Sophia Dobson Collet (ed.): *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*. Calcutta, 1914, p.24.

<sup>20</sup> . Francis Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire* (Translated from the French by Irving Brook), Vol. II. London, William Pickering, 1826, pp.9-19.

<sup>21</sup> . Purna Ch. Majumdar (ed.): *The Musnud of Murshidabad (1704-1904)*. Murshidabad, 1905, p.157.

<sup>22</sup> . *Lampat purus ashe, barbadhu jon baise/Ek vit-e tar adhistan*. Mukundarama Chakraborty: *Kabikankan Chandi* (in Bengali). Calcutta, Bangabasi Electro Machine Press, 1332 B.S., p.90.

<sup>23</sup> . *Gari ghora lona pani, aur randika dhakka hay, esme jo banche musafir mouz kare Kolkatta hay*. Pramathanath Mallick: *Sachitra Kokikatar Katha* (in Bengali), Madhyakanda. Calcutta, Juno Printing Works, 1935, p.65.

the nineteenth century, many Hindu intellectuals raised their voices against the sufferings of the Hindu widows. Raja Rammohan Roy was in favour of the property rights of the widows, though he did not think of widow remarriage. The distresses of the widows of Bengal were not beyond his thinking. It was Rammohan who organised the movement against polygamy. His most significant contribution to society, however, was his all-out effort to eradicate the *Sati* practice from the country. It was due to his persistent persuasion that the East India Company government prohibited *Sati* burning within its territory, and the Bengal Sati Regulation of 1829 was enacted. A group of sensible Bengalis had also been expressing their views in favour of the introduction of widow remarriage among the Hindus. The demand for widow remarriage was nothing new in Bengal. In the early eighteenth century, Raja Raj Ballabh of Dacca and Rani Bhabani of Rajshahi made an attempt to introduce the remarriage of widows in Hindu society but could not succeed.<sup>24</sup>

Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar further intensified the movement for the human rights of women in the country. Vidyasagar's initiative towards women's education and widow remarriage was unbendable and firm. Prior to the revolutionary efforts of Vidyasagar for the remarriage of widows, Shreshchandra Ray, the *zamindar* of Nadia, raised his demand for widow marriage. In contemporary vernacular newspapers, the hardships of the Hindu widows were being repeatedly reported. It has been reported in *Jnanweshan* on April 29, 1837, that Babu Motilal Shil and Babu Haladhar Mallick exerted their efforts to introduce education for girls and remarriage for widows.<sup>25</sup> Vidyasagar was the person who continued his lifelong battle for the basic human rights of women. The social perception in Bengal was that educated women would inevitably become widows. Going against this superstition, Vidyasagar set up not less than 35 girls' schools in the districts of Hooghly, Burdwan, Midnapore, and Nadia. But his most outstanding activity was his all-out effort to introduce widow remarriage among the upper-caste Hindus. He was the leading personality, and due to his tenacious effort, the Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. After the passage of the Act, he personally arranged the remarriage of many widows and started a long battle against perpetual widowhood.

The widow population in Bengal society was very high at the beginning of the nineteenth century for a variety of reasons. A large number of them were from the Hindu community. The majority of the Hindu widows belonged to upper-caste

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<sup>24</sup> . Binay Ghosh: *Vidyasagar O Bangali Samaj* (in Bengali), Vol. III. Calcutta, Bengal Publishers Private Limited, 1338 B.S., pp.164-165; S.M. Rabiul Karim: *Rajshahi Zamindars: A Historical Profile in the Colonial Period (1765-1947)* [an unpublished thesis]. University of North Bengal, pp.115-116.

<sup>25</sup> . Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay (ed.): *Sambadpatre Sekaler Katha* (in Bengali), Vol. II. Kolkata, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 1401 B.S., pp.98-99.

Hindus. Among the low-caste Hindus, the Namasudras also gave up the practice of widow marriage, and the Rajbansis had been following their way.<sup>26</sup> In the past, widow remarriage was popular among castes such as the Namasudra (Chandal), Rajbansi (Kochh), and Mahishya (Kaibartta). All these castes had already prohibited widow remarriage among them, and in this way they had been trying to raise their castes higher on the social ladder of the Hindus by observing the more strict restrictions of Brahmanical Hinduism.<sup>27</sup> Dr. James Wise, the Civil Surgeon of Dacca, reported in the eighties of the nineteenth century that the number of widow marriages was less common than it was in former times. He observed that very few widow remarriages took place only among the Namasudra (Chandal), Mahishya, Goala, Gadariya, Kochh Mandai, Kandho, Kewat, Jaiswara Kurmi, Muriari, Rishi, and Suraj-vansi.<sup>28</sup> Among the Muslims, only the good-looking young widows could remarry, and others had to endure perpetual widowhood. The deplorable circumstances of widowhood in Bengal are represented in the early nineties of the nineteenth century by the following tabular data:

**Table 1: Percentage of widows in Bengal with their age group<sup>29</sup>**

Percentage of widows amongst women aged (years)	Northern Bengal		Eastern Bengal		Western Bengal	
	Hindus	Muslims	Hindus	Muslims	Hindus	Muslims
10-14	4.28	2.26	3.48	1.46	4.29	2.56
15-19	9.88	3.63	9.23	3.04	10.63	5.83
20-24	16.59	5.99	15.86	4.81	17.62	8.91
25-29	24.11	11.28	25.41	8.95	25.86	15.86
30-39	41.58	26.93	43.29	22.63	42.39	32.39

The proportion of widows among the women was high. The Census Report of 1901 reveals that among the Hindu widows, 12.4% belonged to the age group of 20 to 30 years, and 27.9% belonged to the age group of 30 to 40 years. All these widows had to end their lives without being remarried in mainstream Hindu

<sup>26</sup> . E.A. Gait: *Census of India, 1901*, Vol. VI., The Lower Provinces of Bengal and their Feudatories, Part I., The Report. Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1902, p.250.

<sup>27</sup> . C.J. O'Donnell: *Census of India, 1891*, Vol. III., The Lower Provinces of Bengal and their Feudatories, The Report. Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1893, Statement V., p.187.

<sup>28</sup> . James Wise: *Notes on the Races, Castes, and Trades of Eastern Bengal*. London, Harrison and Sons [Not published], 1883, p.124.

<sup>29</sup> . C.J. O'Donnell, *op. cit.*, p.186.



society. The Muhammadan law enjoined the marriage of widows. Among them, the remarriage of widows was not prohibited. In India, the marriage customs of the Hindus gradually created prejudice among the Muslims as well. At the end of the nineteenth century, a Muslim rarely married a widow as his first wife. A remarried Muslim widow would usually become the wife of a widower or of a man who already had another wife. At the same time, the young and handsome unmarried widows among them were rare.<sup>30</sup> The practice of perpetual widowhood was not uncommon among the Muslims. But its proportion was smaller compared to the Hindus.

An individual's most important right is ownership in property. Women have never had free ownership rights in their ancestral or marital property in India. Their right to inherit the familial landed property was limited. In the case of a childless widow, her property rights were much more complicated. Regarding women's property rights in eighteenth-century India, Craufurd recorded:

“The Hindoo women are not entitled to any inheritance. If a man dies without male issue, his fortune descends to his adopted son; or if he has none, to his nearest kinsman, who is obliged to maintain the women and children that belonged to, and were maintained by, the deceased. And if there should even be no property, that duty falls upon those who enjoy the right of inheritance.”<sup>31</sup>

A widow would become helpless in all ways after the death of her husband. The poor widows often had to go outside their family for their livelihood, flouting the threat of indignity. But most of them worked from their homes. We have a petition of a distressed widow of Santipur in the *Samachar Darpan* where she stated that she used to maintain her family of six heads from her income generated through her spinning wheel, but at that time she found herself in a helpless situation because of the import of cotton threads from Britain.<sup>32</sup> Women had no economic freedom in the nineteenth century, though they worked hard for the family. The orthodox society did not approve of women's independent economic activity. Around the early seventies of the nineteenth century, a social tension developed between the Kayasthas and the Namasudras in eastern Bengal since the women of the latter were allowed to go to market.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> . E.A. Gait, *op. cit.*, p.261; B.C. Allen: *Eastern Bengal District Gazetteers: Dacca*. Allahabad, Pioneer Press, 1912, p.60.

<sup>31</sup> . Q. Craufurd, *op. cit.*, pp.2-3.

<sup>32</sup> . Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay (ed.): *Sambadpatre Sekaler Katha* (in Bengali), Vol. I. Kolkata, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Mandir, 1339 B.S., pp.110-111.

<sup>33</sup> . Letter from *W.L. Owen*, *Dist. Superintendent of Police to the Magistrate of Furreedpore* vide Letter No.66 Dated Camp Bhanga, the 18th March 1873, para.5.

In Bengal, it was socially acceptable to confine women under the *parda*. The education of the Bengali girls was initiated by the Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century. In Murshidabad district, the contribution of the London Missionary Society to spreading education among the common people was remarkable. In 1832, James Paterson joined the society. He ran a female school in Murshidabad city with the help of a native teacher. All 28 students at this school belonged to the Hindu community. There were 17 Bagdis, 6 Malos, 3 Kaibarttas, and 2 *Vaishnavas* among them. The teacher was an “Agradani” Brahmin. None of the female students at this school were upper-caste Hindus.<sup>34</sup> The missionaries ran about 22 girls’ schools with 782 girls outside of Calcutta in 1833.<sup>35</sup> In 1840, the Queen’s Girls School was founded at Krishnagar with the object of providing education among the girls of the district.<sup>36</sup> In spite of the initiatives of the missionaries, the mainstream society of the Bengalis sharply discouraged female education, and only a handful of them were able to read and write. When the girls became widows in their infancy, even then, there was no scope for their education or any vocational training for them. In the nineteenth century, the necessity for girls’ education was widely advocated by Bengali intellectuals like Vidyasagar, who exerted their all-out efforts for the spread of female education. But the social perception of girls’ education was not favourable. Only a few women, mostly from the aristocratic families, received an education. The following census report exhibits the deplorable condition of female education in Bengal:

**Table 2: Female Illiterates of Bengal per 10,000 population as per Census Report of 1891<sup>37</sup>**

Divisions	Female Illiterate per 10,000 of the population	
	Hindus	Musalman
Northern Bengal	9965	9993
Darjeeling	9962	9891
Kuch Bihar	9969	9981
Eastern Bengal	9893	9987
Western Bengal	9896	9997

<sup>34</sup> . Debabrata Dhar: ‘A Brief History of Union Christian Training College’ in *Platinum Jubilee Volume (1938-2013), Union Christian Training College*. Berhampore (Murshidabad), p.I-7.

<sup>35</sup> . Kanti Prasanna Sen Gupta: *The Christian Missionaries in Bengal: 1793-1833*. Calcutta, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1971, pp.101-102.

<sup>36</sup> . ‘Amader Kotha’ in *Bhaswati: Queen’s Uchcha Balika Vidyalaya Patrika 2010-11*, (in Bengali), Krishnagar.

<sup>37</sup> . C.J. O’Donnell, *op. cit.*, p.223.

Upon analysis of the data contained in Table 1, it is evident that female literacy rates among both the Hindus and the Muslims were very low. The census report of 1891 disclosed that less than 1% of the Hindu women could read and write. Among the Muslims, barring a few, almost the entire female population was illiterate.

In mediaeval Bengal, it was customary to get the girls and boys married at an early age. Even in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the practice of child marriage for girls was the general rule in Bengal. Until the eighteenth century, the marriage of girls in their infancy was prevalent among the orthodox Hindus. Srafton observed about the marriage rules of Bengal in mid eighteenth century:

“They are married in their infancy; and consummate at fourteen on the male side, and ten or eleven on the female: and it is common to see a woman of twelve with a child in her arms.”<sup>38</sup>

The lower-caste Hindus like the Mahishyas (Kaibarttas), Namasudras (Chandals), and Rajbansis introduced child marriage among them in order to raise them in the social scale of Brahmanical Hinduism from the beginning of the nineteenth century. At the end of the nineteenth century, the proportion of child marriages among them was high. It has been enumerated that in 1911, 22.2% of the Namasudra girls in the age group of 5–12 years were either married or widows.<sup>39</sup> From the table below, an overall picture of the marriage of girl children in the last decade of the nineteenth century can be understood.

**Table 3: Child marriage at different ages among the Hindus and Muslims of Bengal (among 10,000 females)<sup>40</sup>**

Ages (Years)	Northern Bengal		Eastern Bengal		Western Bengal	
	Married Hindus	Married Muslims	Married Hindus	Married Muslims	Married Hindus	Married Muslims
0-9	678	764	692	486	1154	788
10-14	6582	7539	7069	5846	7907	7527
15-19	8632	9441	8959	9429	8789	9266

<sup>38</sup> . Luke Srafton: *Reflections on the Government of Indostan with a Short Sketch of the History of Bengal from 1739 to 1756*. London, T. Cadell, in the Strand, 1770, p.17.

<sup>39</sup> . Sekhar Badyopadhyay: ‘Social Protest or Politics of Backwardness? The Namasudra Movement in Bengal, 1872-1911’ in Basudeb Chattopadhyay, Hari S. Vasudevan, and Rajat Kanta Ray (eds.): *Dissent and Consensus: Protest in pre-Industrial Societies*. Calcutta, K.P. Baghchi & Company, 1989, p.185.

<sup>40</sup> . C.J. O’Donnell, *op. cit.*, Statement V., p.183.

It is evident from the above table that around 70% of the girls in Bengal were married off within fourteen years of age, whether they were Hindus or Muslims, even in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Gait, in the Census Report of 1901, recorded: "Amongst females ... less than a third of the total number are unmarried and of these four-fifths are under 10 and three quarters of the remainder are under 15."<sup>41</sup> We can easily conclude from Gait's report that child marriage was widespread and in full swing even at the turn of the twentieth century.

Polygamy and *Kulinism* became a general practice among the higher grade Brahmins in nineteenth century. Most of the *Kulins* did not support their wives and children and left them to be cared for by their respective father-in-laws.<sup>42</sup> Some *Kulins* having a large number of wives would maintain a register, noting therein the names of their wives, children, fathers-in-law, and their addresses, to refresh their memories.<sup>43</sup> On March 4, 1837, Jnanweswan published a long list of Kulin Brahmins who had taken a large number of wives during their lives.<sup>44</sup> We discover another shocking report of the Kulin marriage in the *Samachar Darpan*, dated December 7, 1839. It was reported in that issue: "Some days ago, a *Kulin* Brahmin, named Govindachandra, a villager of Bally, departed for his heavenly abode, leaving behind his one hundred widows in this world."<sup>45</sup> Most *Kulin* Brahmins were unwilling to give up their marriage practices simply because a monetary incentive was attached to those marriages. Hunter pointed out that many *Kulin* Brahmins of the Dacca district had taken up marriage as a profession, travelled across the country looking for a *Bansaj* or *Bhanga* father with a marriageable daughter, and were willing to pay a large sum to the bridegroom as an honor.<sup>46</sup> From a report prepared by the Deputy Collector of Dacca in 1871, it is learnt that there was a Kulin Brahmin at Bikrampur who had upwards of one hundred wives, while his three sons had fifty, thirty-five, and thirty.<sup>47</sup> Allen reported that the practice of polygamy was a rare incidence outside the community of the Kulin Brahmins.<sup>48</sup> In the nineteenth century, child marriage, *Kulinism*, and polygamy produced a large number of young widows in society.

The inevitable consequence of child marriage, polygamy, and *Kulinism* was premature widowhood, which would befall thousands of women. A Hindu woman had to maintain strict personal chastity. After the death of her husband, she could

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<sup>41</sup> . E.A. Gait, *op. cit.*, p.247.

<sup>42</sup> . W.W. Hunter, *op. cit.* (Vol. V., 1875), p.55.

<sup>43</sup> . L.S.S. O'Malley: *Indian Caste Customs*. Cambridge University Press, 1932, p.10.

<sup>44</sup> . Brajendranath Babyopadhyay, *op. cit.* (Vol. II.), pp.252-253.

<sup>45</sup> . *Ibid*, p.254.

<sup>46</sup> . W.W. Hunter, *op. cit.*, (Vol. V.), p.55.

<sup>47</sup> . *Ibid*.

<sup>48</sup> . B.C. Allen, *op. cit.*, p.60.

not remarry and had to endure perpetual widowhood. The upper-caste Hindu women were required to relinquish their widowhood by burning themselves alive on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands. These heinous practices became unrestrained and rampant in the *mufassil* districts. Ranighat (Ranaghat), Santipur, and Bagna Para were notorious places for *Sati* rites. In 1799, a horrible mass murder in the name of *Sati* practice was committed at Bagna Para. On the death of a person having over 100 wives, 37 of his widows were burnt with him in three days. Three widows were burned on the first day, fifteen on the second, and 19 on the third.<sup>49</sup> *Sati* burning was common along the banks of the Hooghly River. Raja Ram Mohan Roy himself witnessed the burning of his sister-in-law after the death of his elder brother, Jaganmohun, on April 8, 1810.<sup>50</sup> Another act of mass-burning of widows was committed around the second decade of the nineteenth century at Santipur. On the death of Chandra Banerjee, a Kulin Brahmin of Santipur, eight of his wives became *Sati* on his funeral pyre.<sup>51</sup> In a report of the East India Company Government in Bengal, it was published that 706 instances of *Sati* burning had taken place in Bengal in the year 1817 and 650 instances in the year 1819. Among these, 421 instances took place only in Calcutta Division.<sup>52</sup> In the District of Dacca, one hundred and ninety-five widows burned themselves on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands during the period between the years 1815 and 1828.<sup>53</sup> The following number of *Sati* burnings was recorded in Bengal between 1815 and 1818:

**Table 4: Sati burning in Bengal from 1815 to 1818<sup>54</sup>**

Division	Year-wise Number of Sati burning			
	1815	1816	1817	1818
Division of Calcutta	253	289	442	544
Division of Dacca	31	24	52	58
Division of Murshedabad	11	21	42	30

It was not that the *Sati* practice was in vogue only among the Brahmins. Among the total number of 575 cases of *Sati* burning in the Bengal Presidency in 1823, 234 *Satis* belonged to the Brahmin, 35 to the Khetry, 14 to the Vaisya, and 292 to

<sup>49</sup> . James Long: 'The Banks of the Bhagirathi' in *The Calcutta Review*, Vol. VI., 1846 (Second Part), pp.417, 423.

<sup>50</sup> . Sophia Dobson Collet, *op. cit.*, p.50.

<sup>51</sup> . James Long, *op. cit.*, p.416.

<sup>52</sup> . John William Kaye: *The Administration of the East India Company; A History of Indian Progress*. London, Richard Bentley, 1853, p.531.

<sup>53</sup> . James Taylor: *A Sketch of the Topography & Statistics of Dacca*. Calcutta, G.H. Huttman, Military Orphan Press, 1840, p.285.

<sup>54</sup> . Sophia Dobson Collet, *op. cit.*, p.45.

the Sudra.<sup>55</sup> In the early nineteenth century, the immolation of the *Satis* was widely executed. But after the East India Company government prohibited this horrendous custom by enacting the Bengal Sati Regulation of 1829, the instances of Sati burning began to decrease in Bengal. Nonetheless, sporadic cases of Sati practice persisted until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Even at Cossipore, Chitpore, and other places in the vicinity of Calcutta, sati burnings were executed up to 1882.<sup>56</sup>

Widows were treated with contempt in society during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They were considered ill omens, and their presence was not welcomed in any auspicious ceremony. After the death of her husband, the position of the widow in the family suddenly became shocking. A series of restrictions were imposed on the daily life of a widow, irrespective of her age. The widows were required to wear only white clothes. They were prohibited from wearing ornaments and using perfumes. They had to give up eating fish, flesh, or butter and live on plain barley or wheaten bread. She was allowed to eat only once a day.<sup>57</sup> The widows were called *moonda*, a reproachful term that meant “shorn head,” because every widow was supposed to have their hair cut off. When women quarreled, this offensive term, *moonda*, was generally the first abusive word that they used.<sup>58</sup> In most occasions, the widows were sent to their parental homes by their in-laws. During the lifetime of their parents, the widows and their children, if any, could somehow lead a miserable life. After the death of their parents, the widows were compelled to live with their brothers’ family just like a slave or a bonded menial servant.<sup>59</sup>

The society of Bengal was filled with unmarried women, mature widows, and married women left by their husbands in the nineteenth century. The province’s widespread and rampantly immoral sexual relations were an unavoidable result of this social crisis. Regarding the incidence of adulterous relations in Dacca district, Taylor reported that “Adultery, it is asserted by the natives, is of more frequent occurrence in the present day than formerly, and is ascribed to the leniency of the regulations in reference to the punishment of this offence.”<sup>60</sup> On most occasions, among the *Kulin* Brahmins, the age difference between a bridegroom and a bride would be large. In all these marriages, normal conjugal relations were not developed. The *Kulin* fathers of many girls often could not find a suitable match

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<sup>55</sup> . Walter Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p.205.

<sup>56</sup> . W.H. Carey (ed.): *The Good Old Days of Honorable John Company*, Vol. II. Calcutta, R. Cambay & Co., 1907, p.130.

<sup>57</sup> . George Forster, *op. cit.*, p.58.

<sup>58</sup> . Abbe J.A. Dubois: *Hindu Manners*, pp.352-353.

<sup>59</sup> . George Forster, *op. cit.*, p.57.

<sup>60</sup> . James Taylor, *op. cit.*, p.285.

for them. So, these girls remained unmarried all their lives.<sup>61</sup> As a result, they got involved in immoral relations with men other than their husbands, partly for biological reasons and partly because of their exceedingly miserable circumstances.<sup>62</sup> The *Kulin* husbands did not bring their many wives into their homes, preferring to keep them with their respective fathers-in-law. In many cases, a *Kulin* husband would never see many of his wives after marriage.<sup>63</sup> Sometimes, they were intrigued by a Muslim and were outcast after being detected. Finding no other alternative, she sought her asylum under Muhammadanism.<sup>64</sup>

It was not possible for society to stop this immorality only by imposing restrictions.<sup>65</sup> In contemporary literature and newspaper reports, we get a lot of reference to illicit relations in society. The Muslim women of Bakarganj, deserted by their wandering and boatmen husbands, often fell into intrigues. The better-off Namasudras (Chandals) kept widows in the family and lived with them like husband and wife without contracting marriage.<sup>66</sup> Many Hindu widows sought refuge in *Vaishnavite* akhras, where they chose their male counterpart and lived with him as his *Vaishnavi*. The male devotees of the Kishori Bhojan sect had one or more female associates. The members of this sect ordinarily assembled secretly at night to indulge in curious practices, which included sexual intercourse. The female members of this sect were generally young widows, and most of them belonged to low-caste Hindus.<sup>67</sup> Sometimes, the opportunity-seekers took advantage of the helplessness of the poor widows. **The Kartabhaja Mahashayas recruited poor and unprotected widows or women abandoned by their husbands.**<sup>68</sup> These women attended the religious fair at Ghoshpara in large numbers in the nineteenth century. Sometimes a widow and a man from a different

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<sup>61</sup> . E.A. Gait, *op. cit.*, p.249.

<sup>62</sup> . Shib Chunder Bose: *The Hindoos as they are: A Description of the Manners, Customs, and inner Life of Hindoo Society in Bengal*. Calcutta, Thacker, Spink and Co., 1883, p.236.

<sup>63</sup> . J. Westland, *op. cit.*, p.280.

<sup>64</sup> . E.A. Gait, *op. cit.*, Foot-note, p.384.

<sup>65</sup> . *Puruser bibaha hoa kothin byapar; othocho nana byaser bidhabar proti grihastho bharakranto. Tai naitik swastho o otishoy dusito. Samaj ihadiger ache – tahar shason o kom noy, kintu pulisher sahiti chorer je sambondho, samajer sahiti ihara thik sei sambondho pataiya rakhiachhe*. Sharatchandra Chattyopadhyay: *Pallysamaj* (in Bengali). Calcutta, Pradipkumar Sarkar (Publisher), 1394 B.S., p.78.

<sup>66</sup> . H. Beveridge: *The District of Bakargange: Its History and Statistics*. London, Trubner & Co., 1876, pp.257-258.

<sup>67</sup> . B.C. Allen: *Assam District Gazetteers: Sylhet*, Vol. II. Calcutta, Caledonian Steam Printing Works, 1905, pp.84-85.

<sup>68</sup> . Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya: *Hindu Castes and Sects*. Calcutta, Thacker, Spink and Co., 1896, p.486.

social rank would fall into an illicit relationship. As a consequence, both of them were persecuted by and driven out of society. Having no other alternative, they became *Vaishnavs* and lived as husband and wife.<sup>69</sup>

The unavoidable result of rampant illicit sexual relationships in nineteenth-century Bengal was the unintended pregnancy of unmarried women, widows, and women deserted by their husbands. It was disclosed in a letter published in the *Samachar Darpan* on July 4, 1835, that the unmarried daughters of the *Kulin* Brahmins often carried illegitimate children in their wombs through their illicit relations. Fearing social rejection, they would secretly terminate these foetuses in the fifth, sixth, or eighth month by way of surgery or another traditional method.<sup>70</sup> The frequent occurrences of adultery would lead to the administration of drugs to procure abortion, a practice that was prevalent among slave girls belonging to *zamindars* and among the unmarried daughters of the higher castes of the Hindus.<sup>71</sup> But the majority of the unwanted pregnancies occurred in the case of young widows, since their strength in society was high. To conceal unwanted pregnancies of the widows, their parents or relatives used a variety of abortion. On most occasions, the native process was resorted to kill the foetus in the womb. When the pregnancy was detected at an advanced stage, the women were sent to distant places to keep them away from the eyes of their neighbors. According to Ward, the missionary, and a careful inquirer, quoting the information of a Brahmin, 10,000 illegitimate children of the daughters of the *Kulin* Brahmins were thus murdered in the province of Bengal every month.<sup>72</sup> After delivery, the newborn children were buried alive under the earth or thrown away in the bush or jungle. In Bengal, many native doctors and professional women were engaged to kill the undesired embryo in the womb. Many pregnant women died after taking the drugs intended to destroy their unwanted children.<sup>73</sup> Many widows committed suicide in order to hide their unwanted pregnancies from society. The proportion of unmarried widows was very high in nineteenth-century Hindu society. It was recorded in the Census Report of 1891 that 28.08% of the unmarried Hindu widows were in the age group of 20–39 years.<sup>74</sup> The incidence of immoral pregnancies and covert

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<sup>69</sup> . W.W. Hunter, *op. cit.* (Vol. V.), p.57.

<sup>70</sup> . Brajendranath Babyopadhyay, *op. cit.* (Vol. II.), pp.249-250.

<sup>71</sup> . James Taylor, *op. cit.*, p.285.

<sup>72</sup> . William Ward: *A View of the History, Literature, and Mythology, of the Hindoos: including a minute Description of their Manners and Customs, and Translations from their Principal Works*, Vol. I. Serampore, Mission Press, 1818, p.62.

<sup>73</sup> . Norman Chevers: *A Manual of Medical Jurisprudence for India*. Calcutta, Thacker, Spink & Co., 1870, p.713.

<sup>74</sup> . In Northern Bengal, the proportions of Hindu widows in the age groups 20–24, 25–29, and 30–39 were 16.59%, 24.11%, and 41.58%, respectively. The similar proportions in Eastern Bengal were 15.86%, 25.41%, and 43.29%, respectively. In Western Bengal,



abortions occurred among all classes of Bengalis. But a large number of criminal abortions occurred in *Kulin* families because the proportion of young widows was very high among them. The incidence of destroying an illegitimate child in the womb among the widows of the *Kulin* Brahmins was numerous in this country.<sup>75</sup>

In the nineteenth century, widows and women abandoned by their husbands or family members suffered severe social restrictions and hardships. Finding no other alternative, a section of the widows sought refuge in brothels in order to escape these strict regulations.<sup>76</sup> And once a Hindu woman fell into this occupation, she had no way to get home. In Calcutta, a lot of women were engaged in prostitution.<sup>77</sup> The adoption of women into prostitution was publicised in vernacular newspapers to grab the public's attention. It was reported in a letter from a *Samachar Darpan* reader from Pabna that lakhs of *Rarhi Kulins'* widows and unmarried daughters were becoming prostitutes because the East India Company government had not altered their marriage laws.<sup>78</sup> In Dacca town, there were numerous brothels, which were one of the sources of crime and frequent scenes of assaults, thefts, and homicides.<sup>79</sup> In every big town, including Dacca, a large number of prostitutes were found.<sup>80</sup> In Barisal town, numerous professional prostitutes offered services from the brothels.<sup>81</sup> Not only in Barisal town, but in every bazaar in Bakarganj district, there were professional prostitutes. These prostitutes were mainly Hindus. The destitute condition of the Hindu widows compelled them to adopt prostitution as their means of living.<sup>82</sup> In Calcutta, prostitution became a lucrative profession for women. Thousands of Hindu widows, deserted by their husbands and relatives, arrived in the notorious lanes of Calcutta and got their ultimate shelter. An official report in the mid-nineteenth century estimated that nearly 12,000-odd prostitutes lived in Calcutta, of whom

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the respective proportions were recorded to be 17.62%, 25.86%, and 42.39%. The overall rate in Bengal between the age groups of 20 and 39 stands at 28.08%. C.J. O'Donnell, *op. cit.*, p.186.

<sup>75</sup> . Shib Chunder Bose, *op. cit.*, p.167.

<sup>76</sup> . Walter Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p.205; Shib Chunder Bose, *op. cit.*, p.236.

<sup>77</sup> . *Kolkata sahar ... beshyasahar hoe pareche, amon para nai jethay ontoto dosh ghar beshya nai; hethay prati batsar beshyar sankhya briddhi hachchhe boi kamche na.* Kaliprasanna Sinha: *Satik Hutom Penchar Naksha* (in Bengali), Arun Nag (ed.). Calcutta, Subarnarekha, 1398 B.S., p.200.

<sup>78</sup> . Brajendranath Babyopadhyay, *op. cit.* (Vol. II.) pp.253-254.

<sup>79</sup> . James Taylor, *op. cit.*, p.282.

<sup>80</sup> . B.C. Allen, *op. cit.* (Dacca), p.60.

<sup>81</sup> . J.C. Jack: *Bengal District Gazetteers: Bakarganj*. Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1918, p.234.

<sup>82</sup> . H. Beveridge, *op. cit.*, pp.234-235.

more than 10,000 were widows and daughters of *Kulin* Brahmins.<sup>83</sup> According to Dr. Payne's first report prepared in relation to the Contagious Diseases Act, Calcutta, which was published on April 1, 1870, Calcutta had a large number of registered professional prostitutes. Of these, 7939 were Hindus, 1162 were Muslims, 56 Eurasians, 15 Poles, 7 Italians, 5 Englishwomen, 4 Germans, 3 Russians, and 1 Jewess.<sup>84</sup> Following are the Bengal Districts where more than 1,000 prostitutes were enumerated in 1872:

**Table 5: District & number of prostitutes (over 1,000)<sup>85</sup>**

Name of District	Number of Prostitutes
Backergunge	1189
Moorshedabad	1269
Rungpore	1275
Midnapore	1339
Pubna	1719
Dacca	1738
Rajshahye	1941
Nuddea	2111
Mymensing	2218
Hooghly with Howrah	3124
24-Pergunnas	15380

Even in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a large number of helpless widows in Bengal were engaged in prostitution. There were 2,458 brothel keepers in Calcutta on the register in 1880.<sup>86</sup> The social reform activities of the nineteenth century were not sufficient to save the widows of Bengal from being grossly persecuted by a male-dominated society.

### Conclusion

The widows of Bengal were the worst victims of society for hundreds of years. Because remarriage for widows was forbidden in Brahmanical Hinduism, they had to live single for the rest of their lives. Only attractive young widows could remarry among Muslims. A widow from an orthodox Hindu caste was required to

<sup>83</sup> . Sumanta Banerjee: *Dangerous Outcaste: The Prostitute in Nineteenth Century Bengal*. Calcutta, Seagull Books, 2000, p.81.

<sup>84</sup> . Norman Chevers, *op. cit.*, p.712.

<sup>85</sup> . H. Beverley: *Report on the Census of Bengal 1872*. Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1872, General Statement VI., pp.clviii-clix.

<sup>86</sup> . B. Joardar: *Prostitution in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Calcutta*. New Delhi, Inter-India Publications, 1985, p.21.

sacrifice her life on the funeral pyre of her dead husband. The widow, who could save her life after her husband's death, had to live an indignant life without proper human rights. The strength of the widow population in Bengal was very high, and a large proportion of them became widows at a mature age. On account of complex marriage customs, a segment of Hindu men and women could not find their matches for marriage. Adulterous relationships, undesired pregnancies, criminal abortions, and widespread prostitution were common in society. Until the eighteenth century, widows in Bengal faced a great deal of misery and oppression from society. The social reformers of Bengal perceived the hardships and agony of the widows and exerted their efforts to redress their sufferings in the nineteenth century. Due to their persistent persuasions, the East India Company government passed Acts prohibiting the practice of *Sati* and enacting widow remarriage. With the enactment of these laws, the burning of Hindu widows gradually began to decrease, and a few remarriages of widows also took place. But the deprivation of property rights, illiteracy among women, practice of girl-child marriage, polygamy, *Kulinism*, perpetual widowhood, widespread prostitution, and overall social oppression of the widows remained almost as usual. In spite of the social reform efforts of the Bengali intellectuals, only a very little redressal of the sufferings of the widows was achieved in the nineteenth century.