



Remnants of Matriliney

Widows of two Kerala villages

By

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MUCH has been written over the centuries about the hardships undergone by large numbers of widows in many parts of India. In the course of carrying out a segment of a larger study of widows * in India, we gathered impressions about widows in two Kerala villages: Azhikode in the north and Karakulam in the south. Both villages are dominated by communities that in the past followed, and in the main are said to continue to follow, a matrilineal pattern of inheritance. We were primarily interested in learning how these widows manage socially and economically, the extent to which they are financially and otherwise independent, and what share they receive in their parents' and husbands' property.

Background

The proportion of widows among females in these two villages was approximately 7 percent, not very different from their proportion in Kerala (8.9 percent), or from that of India as a whole (8.2 percent).² There were 113 widows in the two villages. Not one of these widows was under 30 years old; 91 of them (81 percent) were over fifty. As we found out when we talked to these women, their problems and concerns were often those common to the aged, not just to widows.³

In the multi-generational family complex induced in previous periods in part by Kerala's system of matrilineal inheritance, care for aged

widows was less of a major problem.

The larger family offered as much financial, emotional and physical support as it could muster to all its members, including its aged widows. However, in that period life expectancy was nowhere near as high as it is today. Consequently, care for the aged was not as great a strain on a family's resources. In the last few generations, there has been a more or less complete shift to a nuclear patrilineal and patri-archal family structure. Despite this shift, residual elements of the culture of the matrilineal family, which gave greater emotional and financial support to widows, continue to influence the way they are treated.

Though, legally, matriliney no longer exists in Kerala, remnants of it are to be found in modified forms in many villages. The major reason Azhikode and Karakulam were chosen for this study is that traces of matriHny are clearly to be seen there. We found that over two-thirds of the widows in these villages lived in houses they inherited from their mothers. The widows themselves, however, in a majority of cases, now live with their sons. In most cases, their daughters had left their natal villages after marriage and continued to reside elsewhere. The sons, though they also got married, stayed on with their widowed mothers, without having any expectation that they would inherit the house and land. They shoulder the main responsibility

for supporting their widowed mother; despite this, they readily part with the property to their sisters upon their mother's death. This readiness seems to relate to the norm in these communities that it is the direct responsibility of the brothers to provide dowries for their sisters, in the form of cash at the time of the wedding, or else to cede all inheritance rights to the land and the house, to their sister/sisters upon the death of their widowed mother.

We got the impression during our interviews with the widows that some change is starting to occur and that in future it may be likely that sons will inherit rather than daughters.⁴ The implications of such a shift are that there could be quite unfavourable changes in widows' lives.

In the majority of cases, the land and house the widows now possessed, though small, were still in their own name. It was rare among these widows to assign their property to their children. This seemed to make a difference in the way they were treated. For example, we observed a few slight but important differences in how the families of those who kept the property in their name behaved towards the widow. When we entered a widow's hut, she would ordinarily offer her visitors chairs. In the houses where the widow retained title as the property owner she would also be provided with a chair. However, in a few of the cases where she had relinquished title to the property, she

sat on the floor, she was talked to in a sharper tone, her family did not visit her as often; instead, she would have to make most of the family visits to them at their homes in order to keep the connection going. Most widows in these villages had made provisions for the transfer of their property only upon their death. They remained in full control of their assets during their lifetime.

Under matrilineal systems in Kerala, widows were supposed to inherit from both their natal family and from their husband's family. However, this seldom actually occurred. They certainly did not inherit any of the ancestral property of the husband's family. In cases where a woman did inherit some property from her husband, it usually happened only if he had built a separate house for his wife and children with his own earnings, away from her in-laws. We found such an arrangement currently for about one out of five widows in the sample.

In the future, following current trends, widows seem likely to inherit less, and less often from their husbands, and increasingly get little or nothing from their mothers. Quite a number of them could face destitution. Widows who contest inheritance cases, rarely have the money to pay legal fees. These cases take a long time, well over three years, to be decided, especially if the other side appeals. There aren't many lawyers willing to work without any pay, in anticipation of payment in the distant future.

However, none of the widows we

interviewed actually complained about not inheriting from the husband. Apparently, under ordinary circumstances, because of the history of the family systems in these villages, they never expected to get anything from that side. We were told that in the old days, when a wife went to live in her husband's house, if he died, the widow was supposed to leave the house quietly, through the back door, thereby indicating the end of her connection with her husband's family. Contact between the widow and the

qualified for a widow's pension. A number of widows had been disqualified for pensions because they had adult sons who, the authorities felt, were supposed to support their widowed mother. However, in many instances the sons did not provide support and the widow received neither pension nor support. Though Kerala has a number of widow pension schemes that are said to cover a large numbers of widows, seem to fall far short of providing for all but a few widows in these villages.⁵

In Kerala there are no clear prescriptions on a widow's dress, mobility, food habits or social status. This is quite in contrast to the rest of India. Remarriage in Kerala is customarily permitted. There was and is no insistence on remaining 'faithful' to a deceased husband and living a life of enforced solitude, characteristic of many other communities in other parts of India. Widhood does not

seem to be a strictly defined status. Socially speaking, there is little

or nothing that would indicate or demarcate a widow from a married woman. Her life is not hemmed in by socially prescribed regulations of lifestyle and behaviour.

Hence, we found it very puzzling that so few widows we met had remarried. Widowers were far more likely to remarry, even if they were old when their wives died. The widows we spoke to said that they didn't remarry because they didn't want to be married again. In their view, even a young woman doesn't consider remarriage unless she's driven into it, if she has no children, or hasn't any



Two Muslim widows from Cannore who were interviewed for this study

husband's family thereafter, including with her own children, were ordinarily few and far between. A large number of the widows we met hadn't seen their in-laws for a very long time, and they didn't seem to miss them terribly either.

What they did complain about was not receiving a government pension. A small proportion, 14 out of 113 (12 percent), were getting such pensions. Four were receiving pensions because their husbands had worked for companies that provided for such payments. Another six were receiving pensions as former agricultural workers. Only four had

other source of income, property, or family support. These widows didn't have a high opinion of young widows who got remarried to much older men. As one widow in Azhikode told us: "These old men want young girls to take care of them in their old age. They don't care if they leave them behind as widows." Widowers seemed more willing to marry without receiving dowry. In marrying off their daughter to a much older man, the girls' parents are often seeking to save on dowry.

In neither village we studied were there expensive funeral rituals and practices. The rituals to be performed on the death of a husband were neither onerous nor expensive. In the past, the husband's family was supposed to share these expenses. If the family was too poor to bear the expenses, neighbours frequently helped out during the traditional first 13 days of mourning. In our sample, there was not a single case of a widow going into debt over funeral expenses. In an instance where neither the in-laws nor the neighbours came forward, the widow just skipped cremation, which is more expensive, and buried her husband in the backyard.

Conclusions

What has emerged in these villages in recent years are more flexible forms of traditional matrilineal family ties within structures that are becoming more and more patrilineal, patrilocal and incipiently patriarchal. However, the residual effects of matriliney still give both economic and emotional support to widows.

Under matriliney, the birth of a girl used to be celebrated in Kerala; even after marriage, she continued to live in her natal home under the care and maintenance of her mother and her maternal uncle. In the two villages we studied, elements of the old family system are still influential in a widow's life. Over two-thirds of the widows lived in houses they had inherited from their mother; the widows in turn were leaving their property mostly to their daughters. However, typically,

they were living with their adult son and his family while their daughters were living with their husbands elsewhere. Though at present there seemed to be little expectation among the widows' sons that they would inherit their mother's property, some tendencies contrary to daughters inheriting appear to be arising.

However, this did not seem to be the current major concern of these widows. Their most frequently expressed concern was that they had been refused widows' pensions which, they felt, they were entitled to receive.

Kerala has a far higher widow to widower ratio than other areas of India:



A Nair Widow

seven to one compared to three to one. Part of this difference is apparently due to the higher survival and life expectancy rates of women in Kerala, as well as what seems likely to be a greater reluctance to remarry. A number of other possible reasons for the ratio differences are discussed.

These village women in Kerala seemed relatively better off than widows in most other areas of India as regards the fewer social restrictions on them, their greater independence and authority in the home, and the lack of discrimination against them in the community. Their major problems and concerns revolved around

obtaining funds to meet the day to day necessities of household living, in common with most other women in India. Our concern, however, is that the emergence of patriliney, in combination with the practice of dowry, does not augur well for the future status of the widows of Kerala.

Endnotes

¹ Similar studies are being carried out in other parts of India under the direction of Martha Alter Chen of the Harvard University Institute of International Development. Our co-researchers in the Kerala Study were Tejas Joseph, Pushpa Phalgunan and Marty Chen. Responsibility for this article is, however, solely ours.

² Though the proportion of widows in Kerala is similar to that of India as a whole, the ratio of widows to widowers is quite different. In the whole of India the ratio is three widows for every widower, while in Kerala there's a ratio of seven widows for every widower. One reason for the higher proportion of widows to widowers in Kerala is that more women than men survive, as shown in the sex ratio. Another is their higher life expectancy in Kerala. Large differences in age at marriage among marriage partners, women being far younger than men, especially in second marriages for men, also are a factor in the higher ratio of widows to widowers in Kerala. Additionally, there may be a stronger disinclination among older Kerala widows without children to remarry as compared to widows in other parts of India, while Kerala widowers may be more likely to remarry.

³ This was further confirmed by our results with regard to the duration of widowhood. Of the widows, 46 percent had spent less than 10 years in widowhood and another 26 percent had spent between 10 and 20 years.

⁴ For example, in a few isolated cases, sons who were present during our interviews seemed to become uncomfortable when we discussed inheritance with their widowed mothers, and would try to see that their mothers avoided answering these questions.

⁵ See Leela Gulati (1990), Agricultural Workers' Pension in Kerala: For Experiment in Social Assistance, *Economic and Political Weekly*. Also, see Leela Gulati and S.I. Rajan, Population Aspect of Aging in Kerala, Centre for Development Studies (mimeo), 1991.