

Chapter I

Introduction

Wars and war widows

Wars are as old almost as the world itself. So is the sad story of the war widows, whether they were buried alive along with their dead warriors and so in ancient Egypt or burnt to death in India from times innumerable, to as late as the nineteenth century. Even if they were allowed to survive and outlive their dead heroes, the taboos of a closed society deprived them of the joie de vivre, the joy of living. Even today, long after the crusades of emancipation of women, initiated by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Maheshwari Kerve, a widowed woman in India, is often times expected to get her head shaven off, her bangles broken, her mangalsutra taken off and her Sindoor smeared away. Not only that, she is asked to wear white and discard cosmetics and keep away from all festivities. Indiscriminate insistence on such high-handed stipulations for almost all widows in our country, in varied measure, left a depressing impact on these unfortunate women, whose suffering is otherwise inconsolable. In the case of war widows, who are overtaken by the sudden tragedy, are bolt from the blue, overnight, such a situation is doubly painful. But with all our traditions of chivalry and valour and chivalry, an appalling apathy had attended the lot of these young wives of our heroes, even upto the very recent times. With meagre resources, sporadic income made available by government or some charitable institutions, they managed to subsist and support their children. After independence, we had fought four wars and it is a matter of regret that

the nation's conscience was never awakened till 1971
the lot of war widows was looked into with more than a
cursorial glance.

Legends and Truths Legends like the self-sacrifice of meherani Padmini
Chitlor, the mass johar ceremonies of self-immolation by the valiant
widows of Rajput warriors, poems like Home they brought her who
dead and epitaphs like Fell them
for their tomorrow, we gave our today, had stirred the imagination
the well-meaning people all over the world. But when all is
said and done, it is amazing that hardly any literature is available on
war widows in India. Besides coming across a few press reports and
television presentations and official records of statistics, I could
lay my hand on any substantial material for research.

For thousand war widows since independence
needed attention, leave alone the army widows, which are
class by themselves and the ^{require} ~~require~~ equal attention. Perhaps
the most pathetic cases are those of the army widows whose
husbands are not exactly battle casualties but were killed
during the preparatory stages of the war and the ruthless nature
the rules do not permit them to have the requisite relief. There
no end of human misery while the resources to help are very
much limited. In the circumstances, the apathy of inter-
pretation of the age-old rule provision, is somewhat under-
standable. The resultant discomfort and discrimination has
however been a sore spot and the inequitable yardstick
has left a lot of apparent injustice in its trail. Some-
times has been perpetuated, despite our earnest desire
to do something for these women in distress.

The ineffectual outcome of such a sad state of affairs can be best illustrated by this tragic tale of woe. During the last world war, two Indian soldiers, ^{both innocents,} both brothers, married to two sisters, went to the operation theatre overseas. One was reported missing, presumably dead while the other came back and took the brother's wife also in his fold and got an issue from her. After the war, the missing brother returned home and claimed his own but the other brother's wife - fair exchange what was allowed by the village Panchayat and as both would have a child from her. Both the brothers were recalled during the Keshavnagar operation where they were killed. Neither the government, nor the society, it is said gave any concern or sustenance to those unfortunate women and ^{their} children and ultimately they ended their sorry story by jumping along with their children into the village well. Even if this sordid tale which is somewhat true, is taken with this amount of pathetic pointer to the indifferent attitudes and rigid rules. And such tales of woe regarding the plight of war widows could be many, not only in our country but in other parts of the world, where wars have been fought from time to time. And they deserve not only a tear of remorse but a thought or action for the future well being of those left behind.

Purpose and Inspiration and Impediments -

Five years after the catastrophe, the impact of the relief measure towards the rehabilitation of these war widows could well be measured and in retrospect realized, in whatever little measure available; in respect of the ones whose heroes had fallen in the other three wars we had fought after 1947. The idea was to find out if they had been reasonably and respectably rehabilitated in the society, for whose sake their breadwinners had made the supreme sacrifice in the prime of their lives. The aspects that needed looking into, were manifold but ^{my hypothesis} mainly centred around the financial, social, psychological and above all emotional rehabilitation. To start with, it seemed to be a wild goose chase. The only agency set up by the Defence Ministry to specifically look into their cases, had long been wound up. The Director General of Resettlement had kept a track of them and helped sort out their individual problems, from time to time, with the help of an exclusive adviser in Mrs Mohini Bhagat. The War widows association, with Mrs Mohini Guri as its president and Mrs Haida Ahmed as its patron had a modest office in the Press Estate, with branches all over the country, the association which is a voluntary organisation runs on donations and the help of social workers seemed to be doing some service to the cause but its role was limited and by its amateur character and financial constraints. Other voluntary bodies like Kasturba Nidhi and Civilizans Council in the Punjab like Central School, modern school and individuals like Bibi Ammatul Islam, Bibi Gulzar Khan MLA, Mrs Gausia Nigam and the Khatip Singh of Nainital, to name just a few, had come to the rescue of the war widows from time to time.

I could interview some 100 widows of officers and other ranks of the army, navy and air force. I had met their children and in some cases, their next of kin. In some cases I interviewed some war widows who had been re-married. That was a delicate situation but it must be recorded that ^{quite a few} ~~some~~ of the new husbands were considerate and cooperative. I met a few mothers of these war heroes and realized that their suffering was no less, though their pitiable plight was attended to only in cases where they were entirely dependant upon their sons for livelihood. In order to have a comparative idea of the concessions given to the war widows I met some army widows and those ones, there were the border line cases. Though my study was confined to the war widows of the 1971 war, I had ^{some of} had an ~~old~~ ^{old} meeting ^{of} the widows of the battle casualties of the previous three wars which we have fought since independence.

Inevitable Exposure

I could also talk to the heads of various institutions looking after the war widows at Delhi, Rohtak, Meerut, Roorkee, Raipura, Chandigarh, Lucknow and Pauri Gharwal. Due to the course of my studies and observation, I was exposed to all sorts of ideas and feelings about the problem. There is a feeling that the problem of war widows has already been solved and one that needs attention is the plight of army widows. There were then quite a few who felt that these women were better off before. I could also sense a ^{lot} ~~some~~ of frustration, carnal interest, infighting and faction-ridden attitudes. Cases of exploitation, misappropriation etc, in individual though, were also there. Occasionally one could hear charges and counter charges which resulted in highlighting personal prejudices and

rather

gnominous ismes, than the compassionate care of the war widows and thus did more harm than good to a commendable cause. Busy bodies, mostly working women with a lot of personal business on hand already, looked held offices of esteem, in the offices of the voluntary organizations and friendly enough, as some of them confided woefully, generally the first question that they were normally asked was, 'are you also a war widow?' Why remind us

The word widow was itself retented by a large number of the wives of the dead warriors, especially those of the officers class and understandably so. I asked about this from their President Madame Mohini. Her and quite a few others. They did not find anything wrong with the nomenclature though they were which was easy of understanding and quite catchy for their fund campaigns. They were however trying to replace it with better and brave words like Veer Patni, Shehad Nari and all that. But then the people would not allow them to be called by any other name. The martyr's Home, where they are housed in Lucknow, is called Vidhwaghar by all and sundry. Another resentment about the name came in context with its exploitation by some vested interests. Some war widows spoke of the limelight that is stolen by the intermediaries. More sensitive ones amongst them retented, ^{even} the way people in the show business ^{and elsewhere} made light of their sacred emblem of the inverted gun with the helmet of the unknown soldier on top, even though it ^{was} ^{primarily} meant to fetch funds for their cause. Money is not all, said the widow of an INS Khukri Commander who went down with his ship. They come, they dance, they joke, they give. They do collect funds and donate for our welfare, but all around talk of the fine celebrations rather all the while, rather than remember the memorable martyrs, who laid down their lives in the prime of their youth for the motherland.

Stand still status

Time stood suddenly in many a happy home, some day or the other during those chilly days and nights of December 19 and it stands so with the neat of kin of our martyrs. So goes with the families of our heroes who laid down their lives in the earlier wars of 1940, 1962 and 1965. Most of them and the officers were in the rank of captains and majors and yet after a look at their modest living quarters, reveals that they are hardly able to maintain just that standard and no more. Even the ~~financial~~ boxes tucked with tapestry seem as set in There is nothing sophisticated or luxurious - most of those utilitarian dwellings. And the lot of the jawan's widow is the more, ^{or as} regards their residential conditions is ~~more~~ ^{concerning} deplorable. In Lucknow, I found one staying in a two colony, along with her parents. Why was she not staying in the humble home allotted to her by the state government? To the question, the very young and ironless widow had tears for an answer. Turned out by her in-laws, she found life very insecure in the new house, where living all by herself, for some time she was robbed off her precious possessions, including a new pressure cooker donated by the grateful comrades in arms of her dead husband. And what an irony of fate, I was to realize that those cadre-conscious widows of officers and other ranks, lived side by side in the same type of quarters by a strange quirk of fate.

Even the financial relief measures, ensured to affectionately
 by a grateful nation, gave them the stand-still status of the
 moment of tragedy. If a jawan died as a sepoy, the pay
 his widow gets will be a sepoy's pay till the age of retirement
 timely he would not have died retired as a sepoy, with all
 the decorations he ^{had} earned ~~she~~ already earned, argued one
 intelligent looking war widow. Similarly in the case of 1965
 heroes, their widows get the comparatively much less emolu-
 -ments on the basis of the salaries available to them before
 service a decade ago, while the index of living along with
 the spirral price rise, had made those rates archaic and
 inadequate. How far can we go on helping? argued a well-
 meaning official and justifiably he had had the financial
 constraints of the country in view and also the reasoning
 that for almost nothing, ~~to~~ something substantial had
 already been provided to the widows of the previous wars. And
 to a large extent, the problems of the widows of new wars
 had willy nilly been solved by the passage of time. Their
 lot could not have been worse than their equally important
 sisters whose husbands died for the cause of the country but not
 as battle casualties and thus didn't get even half the
 amount of benefits bestowed on war widows. Above all there
 are innumerable widows in the country. The comparative comparison
 is a matter of difficult decision, ~~to~~ who should
 be helped and should not be.

Such a rationale is not without its convincing logic. Applied however, to the lot of war widows, it has its weaknesses.

Comrades in arms and after

Quite a few comrades in arms were comrades in death as well, whether they perished in the midair or went down to a watery grave together or faced a fatal blast of fire or a bombshell on the ground. Death is a great leveler. By an irony of fate, war widows of a common collective tragedy in Channab or Dacca, an air crash over Karachi or Kashmir border or a ship wreck in the Indian ocean, had almost the same story to tell about the last moments of their husbands, as overheard from the surviving friends of or the unit authorities. Of course the versions differed times and repetition crept in about their possible survival. Nothing gave way to accusations as well. Death is a great leveler. In the martyrs home at Lucknow, I met the widow of the flight commander of an unfortunate sortie staying next to the widow of the second in command. Similarly widow of a naval commander and that of a Topaz of the IAS Khukri, both hailing from Lucknow, had had quite a few things in common in their calamity. A courageous comrade who amongst these widow was an elevating experience and it was jeopardised only when common business clashes cropped up. A unique feature of this fellow feeling, I found in the community living in the Martyrs Widows Home at Lucknow, where the widows of officers and other rank lived side by side in similar two roomed accommodation and one evening I saw the whole lot of the humbler sisters along with their children watching a television show at the house of an officers widow.