

A Gendered Perspective of the Social Institution of Marriage in Colonial Punjab

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Marriage is a structured and patterned set of social relations and practices. It is embedded in norm and values regarding what marriage should be and is. There are explicit social prescriptions and sanctions by public bodies, the state, religion and community. At the minimum, a marriage makes legal and public, even if not always socially accepted, an intimate relation between two individuals. Further, it establishes a tie between two social groups such as family households, lineages, or clans and at times, reiterates an already existing tie between them. Whether viewed primarily as a contract or a sacrament, marriage establishes a relationship between more than just the two in the conjugal pair. In other words, marriage is an alliance between the two families rather than just two individuals. This characteristic of marriage gives it a social sanction.

Marriage has long been a site for state intervention and the point of entry for concerted efforts at gendered social reform. In looking at the gendered implications of colonial interventions in class, caste and community relations together with law and legal practices, the institution of marriage was also thrown open for debates and discussions and also to be viewed through gendered lens. In the agrarian-cum-military economy of Punjab-Haryana, the British had acknowledged marriage to be an economic necessity[1]. A single man was not expected to perform well agriculturally; and a widower was deemed to be 'half paralysed'[1]. In other words, marriage as a system of controlling the productive and reproductive potential of women was important. It could not be allowed to go out of control or waste and needed to be harnessed[3]. Thus, the colonial perception towards the institution of marriage was an encouraging one, though for their own vested interests.

This research paper aims to reinterpret the concept of marriage in colonial Punjab, particularly in rural areas, within this above mentioned historical and scholarly context. Further, tracing women's voices and gender, rather than the mere fact of marital or other intimacy, is another important aspect which this research paper will cover.

During colonial period girls belonging to high caste families were married off at a very young age which was considered as something of high repute. An insight into this situation is given clearly in the *Khalsa Samachar*. It was considered a customary duty of the father to wed off his daughter. In certain cases where the father showed less concern towards this practice the mother, determined to get her daughter married at an early age, constantly nagged him and made him realize his failure in performing his duty[1]. Realizing his duty the father then rushed to the village priest

to discuss about the possible matches for his daughter.

It was a popular belief by the village priest that if the father got his daughter married between the age group of 7-9 years, then she would be considered as a 'devi', a pious soul; if she was married at the age of 11 then she was a 'kanya', a young girl and if she was married after the age of 12 years, she was considered 'paapi', something that was inauspicious. It might be noted that these three adjectives of *devi*, *kanya* and *paapi* were all social constructions and did not go down well with the law and order of colonial Punjab. The legal age for marrying a daughter was nothing close to what the society itself had constructed. It represents a wide gap between the social construction and the actual legal interpretation of the age of marriage.

Another aspect that needs to be viewed is the voice of the girl which always gets suppressed in the society. Feelings of the girl who is getting married in a very young and early age were of little concern even to her parents. The following folksong stands testimony to the feelings of a girl:

*Chandan de ohleohlekyun khadi
Main ta khadi sababal ji de kol
Babalmukhobol
Babal var lodiye!
Ni jaiyikehojeha var lodiye
Join tareyanvichochann
Channavichonkahn
Kahnayiya var lodiye
Vebabalehojeha var lodiye*

In this folk song the daughter is asking her father to find a groom for her as now she has attained the age of marriage. The father then questions about the qualities of the groom which his daughter desires. Since childhood she has been listening to various stories and fairytales about marriage and her prospective groom. When her father asks about her choice she gets excited and says that she wants the 'best one'.

Totally unaware of the responsibilities in life she is still enjoying her childhood playing with her friends. Realization of marriage actually strikes her when she is sitting in front of the priest who is reading sermons to tie her and her prospective groom in wed-lock. Head bowed down, immersed in her own thoughts she is thinking about all sorts of new clothes and heavy and shiny jewellery. While thinking all this, her neck because of bowing down starts to ache and she tries to look above. At that very moment her mother or one of the elder members of the family stare at her and force her to bow down again[6]. This action of the family members is symbolic of the fact that

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from now onwards the girl would not be able to look face to face with someone. She would now have to bow down throughout her life and listen to the commands of her husband and her inlaws. It was then that during this time the reality of marriage actually dawned upon her. She now realized that marriage was more than wearing new clothes and heavy jewellery. It was actually about serving throughout her life under the commands of her husband and inlaws. This implied keeping her head bowed down in all situations and to adhere to the wishes of the elders in the family.

No one thought about the girl who was getting married. Emphasis was laid on the work qualities of the bride while arranging marriage-the acknowledged requirement being that she should be physically strong so that agricultural work could be performed well as she was to act as a helpmate in the agricultural work[6]. Though a large number of people were involved in the marriage ceremony as active participants, the life after marriage was of no concern to them. The *nigar*, was concerned about the *kare* and *janjeeriyaa* after marriage. The girl was more excited about the new clothes and all types of jewellery which she would adorn after marriage; the priest was more concerned about his fees with which he would run his family; parents thought that by marrying their daughter they had fulfilled the most important duty of their life and lastly the relatives were more concerned about the food and drinks which were to be served at the marriage party[6].

The institution of marriage rests on the harmonious relationship between the bride and the groom which was totally ignored by these active participants. Another thing which must be kept in mind but was often ignored was that the bride and the groom should have a deep meaningful relationship and also they should develop affection for each other[6]. Their understanding should be such that they should support each other in all times whether happy or sad. This support should continue till the end and this is possible only if they develop a mutual feeling of understanding among themselves.

Mismatched marriages were also quite frequent in Punjab during the colonial period. There were instances where the bride and the groom were not compatible enough-an educated boy married to an uneducated girl and vice-versa, a young girl married to an old man. Also the emphasis on 'work qualities' led to disregard of the girl's age and height, with the result that the girl was quite frequently older[6] and sometimes taller than the boy[6]. The parents never thought about the compatibility level between their daughter and the boy with whom she was supposed to get married. They looked for a big house and rich family having a high status in the society. Not once did it occur to them that the boy could be full of flaws and not suitable for their daughter[6]. One finds instances in colonial Punjab where the parents had married their well educated daughter in such a house where the family was a reputed one but the boy was good for nothing[6]. We find such type of mismatched marriage in folk songs also

*Sone sone mere aarsi, shisha jadeya Gujarat,
Murakhpalle pe geya, lava valiraat
Sukaphulgulab da, merijholiaanpeya
Change bhalimerijaan nu, jhora lag geya*

Another instance is when the boy and the girl could not develop any understanding and not a single day

went without arguments[1]. The parents on their side remained satisfied that their daughter was regarded as being married in a rich family and that upgraded the social status of the girl's family too.[7] Marriage of a daughter into a family of higher status sustained and even elevated the status and reputation of the wife giver[7]

The main reason for such mismatched marriages was that parents married their daughters at a very early age and were not concerned about the fate of their daughters. They regarded this as a heavy responsibility which they wanted to perform as soon as possible.

After marriage in her husband's home the girl found her liberty restricted, even though there might be no *pardah*; her spirit repressed, and her whole life being at the beck and call of the critical elders. Even if the atmosphere was friendly, as no doubt it often was, it might still be completely strange; and, cut off from every former tie and every familiar sight and sound, a young sensitive creature might feel the despair of loneliness. If on the other hand the atmosphere was unsympathetic, as might frequently happen in a country where marriage often follows a hard driven bargain, a young bride of twelve or thirteen might 'wilt like a transplanted and unwatered flower'. Frieda Hauswirth who writes with a peculiar knowledge of Hindu households, described how often 'the first weeks and months' of married life were passed 'in passionate homesickness, an intense feeling of forlornness, bewildered shyness, and agonizing self-consciousness.'[7]

Living in a large group involved enormous self-discipline on the part of men and women belonging to all age groups. The joint-family system, in which men and women of all ages lived together under one roof, had a head of family who was generally despotic in nature. This kind of family arrangement was quite common in rural Punjab in colonial period. An individual's personal likes and dislikes were generally made subservient to the general interest of the entire family. These were more strict for the women of the family especially the younger ones.

In a joint family, the mother, or in her absence the wife of the oldest male member held the position of honour. Even grown up sons rarely went against her will and for a little daughter-in-law it was almost unthinkable. The will of the daughter-in-law was always utterly subdued. This despotic atmosphere whether benevolent or the reverse profoundly affected the relationship of husband and wife and made any real companionship between them impossible. The child wife never opened her mouth save to answer a direct question and then twisted in discomfort if it had to be more than a mere yes or no. In the morning she was the first to rise. If during the day while sitting with others she heard the footsteps of her husband, she was immediately supposed to retire and was sharply reprimanded if she lingered on for even a moment. Further, she was expected to cook her husband's food which was served by the mother-in-law. Harshest of all the rules was that she must not converse with her husband before an elder and in the close quarter life of a large household there was nearly always an elder present[1].

It can thus be concluded that a young wife was never at ease when her husband was present and also when

he came back home from work. This strained relationship was not peculiar only in Punjab but existed even in Western countries. The following German Proverb bears testimony to this fact:

A Husband's Mother is the Wife's Devi.[1].

It holds true for even that wife who had been married for years. 'There is great anxiety and our breath remains dry until mid-day meal is taken out in the fields. We may not eat until they have eaten, we must always wait' stated the women of Sialkot.[1] Husband and wife therefore never ate together. There were some instances where husband and wife ate together and the whole village laughed and made fun of them. A soldier couple in Jhelum district defied this general custom and ate together. The result of this was that the whole village mocked at them often.[1] Another soldier couple of the north of Punjab assured that the Koran forbade them eating together because a woman was weak and had less religious faith than man. Eating together would make the man also weak[1].

If however, a wife was free from other duties of the household and had a house of her own, with no mother-in-law about she could sit with her husband when he ate, not to eat but to keep off the flies by fanning him. "Also she must not sit on a charpoy if her husband is sitting on the floor, and if he is sitting on a charpoy, she will rarely be seen sharing it with him." [1] 'In village life, women is definitely much above the level of chattel or beast, though in treatment there are points of resemblance but her position is definitely subordinate.' [1]

With the slow and gradual penetration of the colonial interaction with the rural life there could be seen a lot of change. The first and foremost in the domestic life was the endangered position of the mother-in-law. She was no longer secure on her despotic throne and her authority came to be challenged. The main two props of her despotism were child marriage and the joint family system. With the rising of the age of marriage and diminishing of the joint family system respect of authority of the mother-in-law started declining. With smaller families and older brides, there seemed no longer the same need for a ruler whose word was law nor for a mistress to guide and instruct. In cases where the bride was educated and the mother-in-law not she felt to give rather than to receive instructions. The educated bride was certainly not willing to heed to the unquestioned obedience of the uneducated mother-in-law. 'Now days she would argue and even criticise the ways of her mother-in-law.' [1]

The best solution to ease or avoid this strain without breaking entirely with tradition was for a young married couple to have their own apartments with a separate kitchen but to continue sharing the courtyard of the house and the family life. That gave the daughter-in-law some measure of independence and privacy, yet did not prevent her helping in the common tasks of the household. In families with no strong tradition education might lead to an altogether separate establishment, but in the hive-like villages of Punjab it was easier to arrange for a separate cell than a separate house. In most families the old joint arrangements continued but now the daughter-in-law had come to be more regarded than she was before. She was better clothed and fed and when newly-wed was often indulgently treated. In family matters too she was now beginning to be consulted.[1]

Throughout Punjab, married couples were reported to be happy and contented. A Sikh Jat who knew the central Punjab exceptionally well estimated that sixty percent of the couples were reasonably happy and not more than ten percent were at serious loggerheads. Even in the lawless Manjha, wives were said to be well looked after and most couples lived contentedly together.[1]

The institution of marriage underwent a significant change in the hundred years of colonial rule. The evils related to marriage-child marriage, bride price, marriage expenditure witnessed a change in their character though the change was not much visible in the rural areas owing to the insufficient publicity and adequate machinery to advocate reforms.

A change was seen in the gender relations in the domestic household. Gender relations not only mean the relations between men and women but also relations between two or more women, in this case the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. The illiterate mother-in-law restrained herself from interfering in the matters of her literate daughter-in-law. She did not impose much restrictions on her whereabouts and refrained herself from indulging in between the issues of her son and her daughter-in-law. Thus, gender relations were given a new meaning with a more intimate relationship between husband and wife and a formal relation between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. In this new relation the wife was more of a companion than a subordinate and the daughter-in-law more of an insider than an outsider. With the diminishing of the child marriage and the joint family system the throne of the despotic mother-in-law was also displaced. The daughter-in-law benefitted with the displacement of the throne in regards of her independence and privacy. Thus, the emergence of new forces and factors under the British rule sowed the seeds of improved gender relations which impacted social change even if minimal.

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