

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF WAR WIDOWS IN AMBREEN ZAIDI'S THE
WARRIOR WIDOW****Miss. Riya Amit Kanoujia***Student**Shri Siddhivinayak Mahila Mahavidyalay, Karvenagar**Email Id: Kanoujariya@gmail.com***Abstracts**

Delving into the situation and condition of post war widows in the contemporary times, it has been seen that India has the highest number of war widows in the world, and very less has been debated and researched on the experiences faced by them. These widows cope up with the odds and challenges to make a living and are named as “Veer Nari.” Widows are psychologically disturbed due to the sudden death of their spouse. Though they are ensured a pension but under certain conditions; like she should remain unmarried or marry the living eligible heir of her deceased husband’s family. Social isolation is obvious in their lives and as they are secluded from social relationships due to the social stigma attached to widowhood. The bitterness, trauma and unending questions become an unavoidable part of their life. The research papers explore The Warrior Widow by Ambreen Zaidi who is a social activist and a great writer working for the welfare of the war widows. Presently she is running an organisation Changemakers that works in collaboration with various welfare groups of the Indian Army, where she and her team extend their services to war widows, orphans and people with needs. She has personally met 30 war widows and orphans, which looks to highlight the life of a war widow and her journey of survival.

Key Words: *War Widows; Isolation; Social Stigma; “Veer Nari”*

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Introduction

India is home to traditional and patriarchal society, where the identity of women is associated with her husband even in the 21st century. Widowhood in such a society takes its worst shape. Across Indian societies, women continue to struggle for gender equality and their rights. Widows in India face a lot of problems and hardships in the family and society because of traditional norms, cultural practices, and beliefs in the society. In the patriarchal Hindu society, women’s identity comes from their husbands, because of which their individuality, being a singleton or a widow becomes a symbol of misfortune, and their presence is thought to be inauspicious at happy occasions. They are forced to withdraw completely from the social life of the community and are made to follow a severe discipline which makes their existence a virtual social death. Although efforts were made during the early colonial period, various reforms were introduced to improve the condition of widows in India. Yet, glaring gender

discrimination exists in India over the centuries and widows in India are still the victims of social stigma. Likewise, widow of an armed forces member who has laid down his life for the nation, whether in war or in a military operation is termed a “Veer Nari”. The notion of the Veer Nari can be understood in two ways—first, as a “warrior woman,” and second, as the “woman of a warrior.” a woman becomes a “warrior woman” (Veer Nari) because her sacrifice essentially leaves her in a position where there is a lack of masculine protection in her life which carves an image of a solitary fighter. Also, research has reflected that, “India has the highest number of war widows in the world, and yet there is little research on the lived experiences of war widows in India.” [Estimated around 25,000 war widows]

Upon the death of an army officer, his wife is ensured a pension only if she remains unmarried within the family or marries the living eligible heir of her deceased husband’s family. It is predominantly a social perception of widowhood in India, which becomes yet another way of constructing widowhood “helplessness.”

In this context, the present paper highlights the plight of war widows with specific reference to The Warrior Widows, a real narrative of a soldier's wife, penned down by Ambreen Zaidi. The writer is a social activist who aims at giving voice to the marginalized sect of the society. She was a 20-year-old girl when she got married to an Army officer at Hisar and prior to that she hails from a completely civilian background. In one of her anecdotes, she highlights that Almighty handpicks very special girls to be the army wives and as such life in the army is an enriching experience. Sharing her first-hand experience, she states that army life taught her how to be strong, brave and strong in the face of life affirming experiences. Amidst everyday rigors, hardships of frequent postings and long periods of separation, she learnt how to lend an unwavering support to her husband, to the organization and, in her own way, to the whole country as a whole. As an army wife, she was always drawn towards the issues of war widows and their wards. During their regiments monthly welfare centres or the Crops Day functions, she sat with them, heard them out and then helped them in whichever way she could. One emotion that united them all, was that they were indeed broken by the tragedy but not beaten. These valiant women are the force behind their soldiers and carry on with their duties long after they had laid down their life for the nation.

The Warrior Widows is a tribute to the wives of the soldiers of the Armed Forces, who are engaged in defending the country from internal and external threats. Everyone knows that sacrifices a soldier makes in terms of family life, personal comfort, and the role and contribution of a wife in a soldier’s life are seldom highlighted and mostly forgotten. When a soldier dies, the wife transients into a state called ‘Widowhood’. The world of these widows is totally different, given the stigma attached to being a widow especially in our country with its old customs and traditions. Many widows are left to fend for themselves, and many succumb to the bleak situation which stares at them. However, many of the widows show great resolve and determination to overcome the personal loss and move on to create a future for themselves regardless of the support they receive from the environment and society. Likewise, the writer here brings out the sacrifices, struggles, and personal journeys of the strong-willed women who succeeded in creating their own success stories.

Within society, there are several challenges that have been experienced by war widows and they prove to be barriers within the course of their development. The main reason for the occurrence of conflicts and disputes is that widows are said to be a burden upon the family as well as the society as they do not earn. Widows are deprived

of their social rights like the rights to equality before the law and to equal protection, right to equality with respect to marriage, right to own property and right to an adequate standard of living, including the right to proper housing due to the social influence of family. Remarriages of widows is still a big concern due to high demand of dowries / bride price, due to which widows, as well as their family members express unwillingness. Widows experience problems with regards to inheriting the land or the property belonging to her deceased husband as they are not considered to be worthy. Most of the widows are uneducated or do not possess any academic knowledge that can provide them a better living and it leads to poverty; they are helpless and dependent on the mercy of the society. Living a normal life in today's time is not very easy, and if the woman's financial condition is dependent on the trust of her husband, then the life of a widow becomes financially weak. In such a situation, various types of schemes have been implemented by the Indian government which make the life of the widow financially good and in view of the economic condition of the widows, schemes such as Indira Gandhi Widow Pension Scheme, Widow Women in State Service Commission, separate quota for Pradhan Mantri Sewing Machine Scheme as well various schemes run by state government.

Objectives

- To explore and understand the various challenges faced by war widows.
- Assistance provided by the government and welfare committee for war widows.
- Analysis of Zaidi's work in context with the contemporary scenario.

Ambreen Zaidi's The Warrior Widows: Analysis of the Text

Large number of soldiers laid down their lives for the nation. Many families lost their breadwinners, and women and children were in great distress. There are a few authors who pen down the distress of such widows, Ambreen Zaidi is one such writer who works on enlightening the problems of widows in the society. Being an Army officer's wife, Ambreen has been actively involved in the welfare of War Widows & Orphans. Putting her experience and expertise to good use, she has founded an organisation "The Changemakers", where she and her team identify, mentor and guide war widows, war orphans, and people with needs that lead them to a life of utmost dignity and respect. Ambreen got inspired to pen down for the Widows after she experienced some families deprived of pension and thrown out of their house. After Ambreen's intervention their pension was started. When the families of these widows came to know that the pension had started, they forced them to come back home. This incident shivered Ambreen from inside and she started writing on the welfare of these Veer Naris. From her "Changemaker" organisation she came across many brave ladies who stood rock solid in the face of tragedy and became an anchor, a source of strength for their family.

The Warrior Widow is dedicated to the Warrior Women/Veer Naris of Indian armed forces, these women are also stated as "Veer Naris." In Indian society there is a social stigma attached to these War Widows due to which they don't get proper guidance and means of empowerment. Even in our country there are different states which have different grants for Widows. For example, Widows of Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana get better benefits than other states. There are significant inequalities which persist at every level. The author had many interactions with the War Widows/Veer Naris of different regiments, wherein she came to know that there are a couple of places in Rajasthan which have sent a huge number of sons to serve the nation. Shergarh, a tehsil of Jodhpur district which

has 33 villages under it, is home to countless war heroes. Gahamar village in Ghazipur district, in eastern Uttar Pradesh has almost 18,000 men serving in the Indian Army. These villagers, women and their children never regret, they never rue the fact that their men left them soon and will never come back. According to Ravinder Singh, the patriarch of a family with two sons in the Army, one is retired and one is still serving, “Politicians come and go, today it is one government in power tomorrow there will be another, par Bharat Mata ki Raksha toh Humne hi Karni Hai” these words are said by the villagers.

Ambreen herself went to interact with these women who have such an immense emotional and mental strength, every time she wondered what gave them such a pragmatic view of life. Ambreen dedicated the first chapter of her book to Saira Bano, a 103-year-old widow. Her love story was a tale of dedication, love and sacrifice, something very rare in the times we live in. Saira was married to Sepoy Taj Mohammed at a tender age of 14 years when World War 2 was going on. The year was 1939 and right after their Nikah Ceremony, Taj was called to report for duty to his unit. Taj immediately left for his army unit. Saira waited for him for six years but didn’t return, and the news that he is no more, shook her immensely. Thereafter she laid her life for the welfare of women, she also spent all her pension to educate the girls of her village and also, of the villages around. This love story of Saira and Taj is a legendary example of love, sacrifice, dedication and utmost commitment between two people and the pride it evokes for the fallen soldiers of this nation.

The chapters of this book are an inspiration for every widow of an army men, despite having so many challenges, they came out of those difficult times and prepared themselves to face the world. Many of their children who grew up knowing that our country is safe because of our parents. They knew their heroism. The hollowness of calling “PAPA” knowing fully well that no one respond. These Warrior widows play both the roles of being a mother as well as father for their children.

The work shares personal narratives and interactions with war widows and assists in understanding their problems and challenges they faced. Zaidi also states that she met some warrior widows who tried to cope with the challenges and made themselves strong to serve for the nation. They got the chance to join the Indian Army and made their martyr husband and their families proud. In one of the chapters, there is an emphasis on insights by Shakuntala wife of Lt Col Ajit V Bhandarkar as her man laid down his life on the line of control during the Operation Rakshak at Jammu and Kashmir terrorist attack. She says, “We don’t know them all, but we owe them all”. The words trace not only the pain of a wife but of all those families who lost their husbands/fathers/sons/brothers in the line of duty have paid a huge price. Every day is a challenge, and no amount of sympathy or money can ever bring back their precious loved ones. But she is proud of the Indian Army, its culture and its ethos. Similarly, to quote from the text, Surekha, a village girl of Akola district got married to Sepoy Bhaskar Shrivastav Patond and faced the tragedy. She narrates, “Life came crashing down on me when the news of my husband’s death came. But life does carry on. I have never been the same again, but I have been stronger than before for the sake of my two children. And today I am proud of the choices I made despite the trauma and social taboos existing around me” “Jab ek aurat ek Fauji se shaadi karti hain use pata hona chahiye ki us fauji ke sar par kafan bandha hua hai. Main jab chutti par ghar aaunga, tab tumhaare liye hoon, warna har waqt har samay apne desh ke liye hoon. Chhutti par bhi agar desh ko meri zaroorat padi toh main foran wapas jaaunga.” “Dekh main ek Fauji hoon, mera desh mere liye sabse phele

aayega, ab jana hai tho jana hai.” These quotes from the text were said by an army man Daler Singh to his wife Sharda to highlight the prominence of professional life over the personal one. As a soldier, they give their life to the nation and in return the nation should treat their families and support them in utter pain and adverse conditions. Bringing to forefront the way society treats war widows, Rupinder, wife of Major SPS Waraich highlights the umpteen challenges a widow faces as she states: “Widows and orphans are the only reality which are forgotten in time...Hamari Ladayi toh ab shuru hoti hai, system se, society se, har ek se, apne haq ke liye ladna padta hai” In all societies, soldiers, veterans and martyrs are treated with a lot of respect. When a soldier sacrifices his life during the course of his duty, the media hype may last for a few days and thereafter the focus shifts to other TRP related news events. Eventually the family is left alone to fend for itself. With the inputs from past experiences, the government has done a lot of planning to ensure sound financial support to dependents of martyrs. The Central Government released grants/pension/other service benefits for the martyrs’ families. Zaidi through her work focusses on the requirements and the support needed for these martyrs’ families. She says that the death of a soldier creates a void in the family and the family faces a psychological challenge. While monetary compensation is adequate, what seems to be lacking is institutional support to enable the family to cope up with the psychological distress. It needs to be understood that the rules framed by the Central Government ensure that Veer Nari retains her pension, even after remarriage. Guidance should be provided to the children of these martyrs, as dedicated guidance of a father is no longer available to these children, career counselling and future guidance remains a much-desired field of concern. Other than these, following rights should be given to them for making their lives secure: Inheritance of Ancestral Property: Indian patriarchal set-up of the society does not encourage widows to demand their share of ancestral property. The local revenue authorities should consider and do the needful for these widows to secure their lives. Impediments to Mental Health: The death of the soldier leaves a void in the family. The complications arising due to issues connected with lack of social support, denial of rightful rights and a social system that expects a widow to accept decisions made by others concerning her life, leads to mental stress in these Veer Nari. Some steps should be taken to fill the gaps and let these women take their own decisions.

The book is a voice of women giving a great message to all the War widows/Veer Naris- “Be resolute in whatever you do and strive to be self-reliant and give back to the society something for the betterment of all”. There is an urgent need to adopt new perspectives on Widowhood. It is essential to break through the glass ceiling of ingrained narrow patriarchy and create a gender equal and humane society in India. With proper awareness and policies, we can hope to make great steps towards the achievement of rights for the widows of India.

Conclusion

This research paper analysed the miserable plight of war widows in India, who are still living on the mercy of the society and are vulnerable to the social stigma, due to lack of employment, education, gender equalities, psychological stress, society rituals [remarriages, dowry], orthodox thinking of the society. Though a lot has been done by the Government and civilian NGOs for the War widows/Veer Naris over the past years, there is a scope to further improve in all fronts especially for the low educated and women staying in Remote Rural areas of the country. The state Government through the District Sainik welfare schemes can conduct more awareness schemes and active monitoring to support women in Rural areas. Welfare committees can sensitize widows about their legal

rights and actions and can support in generating funds to run cases for the needy. The problems of war widows must be viewed holistically by the society and support must be provided to them to lead a dignified life with real true respect to the martyred soul of their husband. Also, they should be regarded as individuals rather than being relegated and demeaned in the society as a jinx.

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