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Marriage: As a prominent social institution described in the epic Mahabharata

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Abstract

The Mahabharata, which developed from the Bharata samhita, plays an important part in the development of ancient Indian social character. It is a valuable treasure of our ancient culture and civilisation. It occupies a unique place in ancient Indian Literature and philosophy. It is an encyclopaedia of Indian intellectual tradition in which social ethical, moral and ethical conditions are describe extensively. Its comprehensive character has been duly expressed in the epic verse, "What is here found here may be found elsewhere, but what is not found in it cannot be found anywhere." It throws abundant light on the specific character of the ancient Indian society and furnishes facts and circumstances hardly available from any other sources.

Epic thinkers have attempted to discuss elaborately about various social institutions which regulate the social life of man. A developed social life is possible only if there are well organised social institutions. Therefore, to attain the highest goal of life and for establishing peace and order in society epic thinkers have feel the necessity of some institutions which are able to control to the situation on the whole social performances. The epic Mahabharata refers to many social institutions to fulfill these purposes. These institutions are Education, Marriage, Family and State etc. Among these institutions marriage is the most prominent Institution. Marriage is more important than any other institution one is capable to form in this life, as it is not individual's happiness only, but that of others also, which is affected by their conduct in it. It has been ordained for the protection of society from foul and immoral acts on the one hand, and continuance of the chain of society itself on the other.

So the Purpose of present paper is to study the institution of marriage critically and elaborately as discussed in Mahabharata with their contemporary relevance. And to discuss how this institutions is able to make a society as an organic whole by establishing peace and order in the society.

Keywords: Mahabharata, marriage, social institution, dharma, trivarga, polygamy, polyandry

Introduction

Social institutions are the result of mans attempt to satisfy the basic individual and social needs in a socially acceptable way. According to Cooley ^[1] " Social institutions are permanent social agencies originating in the necessity of satisfying, in a more or less cooperative way, these wants and needs of human nature as they work themselves out in social life. Social Institutions are thus ways people Behave. They are systems of action, adapted for some purpose. They determine man's social relationship, give direction to his social life and regulate his conduct for realisation of individual as well as social good.

Institutions decide the course of action for the individual, the values to be pursued by man of action for the individual, the values to be pursued by man of actions for the individual, the value is to be pursued by man and thus serve as the chief agencies for social control. They carry the social heritage to the younger generation and discipline man to work for the promotion of social values. Thus, they provide the basis for the guarantee of social values and promote stability and progress of the social order.

Ancient Indian thinkers have attempted to discuss elaborately about various social institutions which regulate the social life of man. A developed social life is possible only if there are well organised social institutions. Civilisation requires good and well developed social institutions. Social institutions are the most important part of the social structure as they provide the necessary and the suitable atmosphere for peace and progress of the society.

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¹ Cooley, *Social Orgaisation*, p.314

They provide help the individual in his attempts to develop his personality and discipline his conduct by enabling him to contribute his maximum for the progress of his fellow beings. The epic thinkers, therefore, took pains to study critically and elaborately the various social institutions, their nature, kinds, importance and aims. There are many but I have taken only marriage here. So, the discussion are here;

Marriage

The marriage occupies a prominent place in the social institutions of civilized world. Marriage is an institution which tries to regulate man's relation with women and determines the relation of a child to the community. According to the Hindu, marriage is not merely a sex alliance but is also an economic alliance and a social and spiritual responsibility. Ancient thinkers consider this institution of marriage as a religious sacrament, an eternal spiritual union of a man and a woman for the performance of various social duties. A Hindu wife is called a *Dharmapatni* or *Sahadharmini*- a spiritual partner. She is an economic partner too as she is responsible for the efficient internal management of household affairs whereas the husband is to deal with the outside affairs only.

Further, marriage is a typical institution marking the starting of an important stage in human evolution. It enables the individual to perform some important duties aiming at three objectives, namely promotions of dharma or virtue, provision of *prajā* or progeny and obtaining *rati* or enjoyment^[2]. Thus, Hindu marriage is not merely a social contract but a religious sacrament. It results in a mere or less permanent relationship between a man and women. Marriage aims not only a physical pleasure but spiritual advancement. It is not merely an individual function but has social importance. The aims of the Marriage are as follows:

Fulfilment of Dharma: According to the epic marriage is the basis of all religious activities. According to K.M. Kapadia, "Marriage being thus primarily for the fulfilment of duties, the basic aim of marriage was Dharma^[3]. Dharma is the most important end of the Hindu Marriage. It is the instrument which helps the realisation of the final goal, supreme spiritual progress i.e. Mokṣa. Marriage is desired not so much for obtaining a life partner or progeny or enjoyment as for the fulfilment of one's sacred duties. It is the duty of the householder to perform the five great sacrifices daily in the company of his wife and to keep the sacred fire always burning. A Hindu is not expected to perform any ritual alone^[4].

According to *Mahābhārata*, man is in fact, only a half man, his wife being the second and better half. She is his best friend and means of attaining *trivarga*. Those that have wives can fulfil their due obligations in this world; those that have wives can be happy and those that have wives can lead a full life. As stated in *Ādi parva*-

Ardham bhāryā manuṣyasya bhāryā śreṣṭhatamaḥ sakhā |
bhāryā mūlām trivargasya bhāryā mūlām tariṣyantāḥ ||
Bhāryāvantaḥ pramodante bhāryāvantaḥ śriyānvitāḥ |

² Kapadia-Marriage and family in India, p.167

³ Kapadia, K.M, Marriage and family in India, p.168

⁴ *Agni kāryaparā nityam sadā puṣṭapalipradā |*

devatātithi bhṛtyānām nirvāpya patinā saha||Mbh., Anu., 146.49

Bhāryāvantaḥ kriyāvantaḥ sabhāryā ghamedhinaḥ ||^[5]

Marriage is held as a religious necessity. It enables a man to have a wife and then a son and thus to pay off his debt towards parents. In this way, *Mahābhārata* recommends that after the completion of his studies, the individual must lead to married life, a life which is at the base of the entire social structures.

Procreation: procreation is another important purpose of marriage. Procreation is particularly emphasized because it helps the continuation of the family line. Marriage is an important social duty towards the family and the community. Besides, for an individual, birth of a son is an imperative, for it enables attainment of liberation after getting rid of one's duty towards the ancestors. According to *Manu*, marriage is a social institution for the regulation of proper relations between the sexes. The ancient scriptures have compared the sexual pleasure with the realisation of divine bliss. According to *Vātsyāyana* sexual pleasure is the chief aim of marriage.

Enjoyment: Enjoyment is the third and the last purpose of the marriage. Life, according to the Hindu, is to be lived not so much for one's self as for one's family and community and, to the greatest extent, for dharma. According to the *Mahābhārata*, *Jaratkārū* had to marry only for his family and community. As stated in *Ādi Parva*:

Na dārān vai kariṣye'ham na dhanam jīvitārthataḥ |
bhavatām tu hitārthāya kariṣye dārasamgraham ||^[6]

A virtuous unmarried lady had to marry at last as, being unmarried, she was unable to realise salvation. As a concrete process of sublimation of one's baser instincts and channelling them for the supreme value, Dharma has been emphasized as the most important purpose of the Hindu marriage. According to some thinkers, society was multifarious in the most ancient days. According to the *Mahābhārata*, it was *vetaketu*,^[7] the son of saint *Uddālaka*, who abolished this custom and established the institution of marriage. Promiscuity must have belonged to the pre Vedic days. The Vedic society too had a clear conception of a well established home with a loving wife. *R̥gveda*^[8] identified wife with the home-"the wife is verily the home. A house without wife is just like the forest^[9]. So, for a man, marriage marks the start of a sacred life. An unmarried individual is held as impure and hence unfit for any sacred purpose^[10].

Types of Marriage in Mahābhārata

The *Mahābhārata* recommends monogamy as the usual form of marriage although it allows polygamy and even polyandry in special cases. The Hindu conception of a happy marriage as a long life or eternal spiritual union of husband and wife justified the idea of monogamy as the usual form of the marriage. Polygamy was practised in

⁵ *Ibid.*, *Ādi*, 74.41

⁶ *Ibid.*, *Ādi*.13.27

⁷ *Ibid.*, *Ādi*.122.20-21

⁸ *R̥gveda.*, III,53.6

⁹ *Mbh.*, *Śānti.*, 144.6

¹⁰ *Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa* II.2.26

ancient India only in the cases of royal personages and certain brāhmaṇa priests. It was preferred to polyandry^[11]. In fact, polyandry is not a characteristic mark of ancient culture. Draupadī's instance is an exceptional case attempts are made to justify it in various ways^[12]. The marriage rite and the mantras, recited at the time of the marriage, emphatically point out that the bride is the sole partner of the bridegroom in all his sacred duties, wealth and love. No other female can be allowed as the second wife, for in that case, the first wife will be deprived of at least a portion of her right. So the husband and the wife must be united with one heart and one mind. Ancient scriptures might have allowed remarriage of the male for only reason that the individual might have progeny by remarriage if his first marriage failed.

The *Mahābhārata* recognises eight forms of marriage, viz., Brāhma, Daiva, Ārṣa, Prajāpatya, Āsura, Gāndhārva, Rākṣasa and Paiśāca. The description of these is found in Ādi Parva. As quoted-

*Aṣṭāveva samāsena vivāhā dharmataḥ smṛtāḥ |
Brāhmo devastathaivārṣaḥ prajāpatyasyastathāsuraḥ ||
gāndharvo rākṣascaiva paiśācaścāṣṭamaḥ smṛtāḥ |
teṣāṃ dhamryān yathāpūrvam manuḥ svāyambhuvo |
bravīta ||*^[13]

Among these Paiśāca and Āsura forms are denounced^[14]. The best form of the marriage is *Brāhmavivāha*, and is specially recommended for a Brāhmaṇa. In this form, a good and qualified boy is invited and offered a well decorated girl unconditionally^[15]. Being free from physical force, fraud, carnal appetite, imposition of conditions and lure of money, it is held as the best and the most decent marriage. Such marriages are popular today.

Age of marriage in the epic

Ancient Indian thinkers have favoured the marriage of a young and mature boy with a young and mature girl. And never allowed marriage in early ages. According to the *Mahābhārata*, a boy is allowed to marry only after he completes his studies, that is at least, at the age of twenty five^[16]. A girl too can be married only when she is mature^[17]. In the epic *Mahābhārata*, girls like Draupadī, Ulūpi, Devyānī, Hiḍimba etc are married at quite a mature age. Emphasis is given to the marriage at proper age. But later, the age of the marriage, particularly in the case of a girl was lowered either due to foreign invasion or as an impact of tāntric cult which made the position of the virgin girl highly insecure. The epic, therefore, allows marriage of an immature girl^[18].

Marriage of a girl according to *Mahābhārata*, is finalised with the chanting of Vedic hymns and offering of the girl by her parents to a suitable boy who accepts her in the presence

of friends and relatives^[19]. At that time marriage rites becomes complete with satapadī. As quoted:

*Pāṇigrahaṇamantrāṇāṃ niṣṭhā syāt saptame pade |
pāṇigrahasya bhāryā syād yasya cādbhiḥ pradīyate |
iti deyaṃ vadanyatra ta enaṃ niścayaṃ viduḥ ||*^[20]

Mahābhārata lays great stress on marrying a suitable girl with a suitable boy. The girl should be favourable, of good family, equal in status and given by her relatives before burning the fire^[21]. She should belong to a good family, have good characteristics and be mature in age^[22].

A girl devoid of some limb or with some extra organ is not allowed to be married. A girl of similar gotra or parva or unknown or low parentage, or suffering from some disease, like jaundice, leprosy etc or from of a family suffering from serious disease, have to be avoided for marriage.

Mahābhārata mostly advocates of endogamy or savarna marriage. Savarna marriage means marriage of a boy and a girl having same varṇa^[23]. It is advocated due to the fact that similarity in Varṇa means similarity in nature, qualities and cultural traditions. This may help better adjustment by the couple, imbibing a common social heredity for the progeny. Marriage in a good and superior family which is known as hypergamy is emphasised. This led to the marriage of *anuloma* marriage, the marriage of a girl of lower varṇa to the boy of higher varṇa. *Anuloma* Marriage is preferred to *Pratiloma* marriage or marriage of a girl of a higher varṇa to a boy of lower varṇa. *Mahābhārata* is full of many instances of intermarriage. Marriage of Parāśara and Satyavatī^[24], Cyavan and Sukanyā^[25], Rcika and Gādhi kanyā^[26] Rṣyaśṅga and Sāntā^[27], Agastya and Lopāmudra^[28], Jmadagni and Reṇūkā^[29] are instances of anuloma marriage while those of Yayāti and Devyānī^[30] sakuntalā and Duṣyanta^[31] of pratiloma marriage.

Modern changes in Hindu marriage: Today, due to influence of the western culture and English education the Hindu marriage system has undergone considerable changes, the important among them being the following:

Marriage is not held as compulsory: In Hindu society formerly marriage was considered to be absolutely compulsory for both male and female. According to Hindu texts or scriptures a person who does not beget a son through marriage cannot attain heaven. The birth of a son was considered to be necessary for the well being of the ancestors. No man could perform Yajña without a wife. Marriage therefore was necessary even for religious

¹⁹ Ibid. Anuśāsana.44.25

²⁰ Ibid. Anuśāsana.44.55

²¹ *Anukūlāmanuvaṃśāṃ brātrā datāmapāgnikām |*

Parikramya yathānyāyam bhāryāṃ vindeda dvijottamaḥ || Ibid.

Anuśāsana.44.56

²² Ibid. Anuśāsana, 122-123

²³ Ibid, 44.33

²⁴ Ibid., Ādi.,63

²⁵ Ibid., Vana., 122

²⁶ Ibid., Anuśāsana, 4.19

²⁷ Ibid., Vana.113

²⁸ Ibid, Vana.87

²⁹ Ibid., Vana.116

³⁰ Ibid., Ādi.81

³¹ Ibid., Ādi, 71, 72 and 73

¹¹ Mbh, Ādi. 157.36

¹² Ibid, Ādi, chapters. 195 & 196

¹³ Ibid, Ādi, 73.8-9

¹⁴ *Piśāca āsuraścaiva na kartavyau kadācana |*

Anena vidhinā kāryo dharmasyaiśā gati smṛtāḥ || Ibid., Ādi, 73.12

¹⁵ Ibid, Ādi.102. 12-13

¹⁶ Ibid, Anu.141.37

¹⁷ Ibid, Anuśāsana.101.123

¹⁸ Ibid, Anuśāsana. 44.14

purposes. But, due to influence of the western culture many males and females do not consider marriage to be necessary these days. Some people because of economic difficulties do not enter in to marriage life.

The modern educated Hindu girl is not prepared to accept the slavery of male. She marries for love and if it is not forthcoming she refuses to marry. Many girls, especially those who are in job, do not marry unless they get a suitable match and if such a match is not available they choose not to marry at all. The educated men and women do not believe in the ancient religious values and therefore do not consider marriage to be necessary.

**Breaking of the taboos of Sagotra and Sapra-
Marriage:** Ancient Hindu traditions forbid the marriage of persons belonging to the same Gotra and Pravara. This very much restricts the field of choice of mate. Therefore, at the present the educated persons are gradually violating the restrictions. It has also been rejected by law.

Opposition of Child Marriage: In medieval India the custom of child marriage was very much in vogue. After passing of Sarada Act child marriages have become illegal. Another fact leading to restriction of child marriage in Hindu society is tremendous increase of women education. The boys also do not marry early because of late settlement in carrier.

Permission of Inter caste Marriage: formerly, inter-caste marriage was considered to be wrong in Hindu society. It has now been legally permitted. With the increase of co-education, women education and the democratic ideal of equality and liberty, inter-caste marriages are now considered to be the signs of forwardness.

Prohibition of Polygamy: Formerly, man was allowed to marry several women in order to get a son, with the increase of women education the ladies are demanding equal rights in marriage. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 has declared polygamy to be illegal. No one can marry in second time, while the former spouse is alive.

Permission to Widow Remarriage: Due to untiring efforts of social reformers and educated persons widow remarriage is no more considered to be wrong in society.

Provisions for Divorce: The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 has introduced the significant change in the institution of Hindu marriage by permitting divorce under certain specific circumstances.

The above mention changes in Hindu marriage are indicative of progress on the one hand and disorganisation on the other hand. The increase in the incidence of divorce, the increase in the age of marriage and rise in the incidence of extra-marital sex relationships are indicative of disorganisation in Hindu marriage changes such as the prohibition of polygamy the restriction of child marriages, the permission of widow marriage and freedom in the choice of mate are healthy signs of progress.

Thus, on the whole, it cannot be said that the changes in Hindu Marriage in recent times have led to its degeneration. The sanctity of marital bond has however, diminished. It is no more unbreakable. It can be broken if there is no love and harmony between wife and husband. In fact, the Hindu marriage system is passing through a transitional stage.

English education, women education, influence of western culture, urbanisation and industrialisation have changed the

social values of the Hindu male and female. In spite of these fast changes, it can be safely predicted that there is no immediate danger to the institution of Hindu marriage, because of the psychological security which it provides.

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