

FROM SATI TO SEPARATION

Changing Attitudes of Indian Women on Divorce

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Socially, one of the most fundamental and remarkable changes brought about since India's independence has been the comparative emancipation of women-their emergence from the exclusive seclusion of the home into the activities of the world (Kapur, 1974:3). Traditionally, a married women's world was her home. She was primarily required to look after the welfare of her husband, her children, and other members of the family, while her husband's task was to assume full responsibility of making adequate arrangements for the provision and protection of the family. Such deeply laid patterns of behaviour do not respond easily to change.

Yet, changed socio-economic conditions, particularly after independence, have widened opportunities for women's education and employment and have provided them with new avenues to press for equality. This, along with newly granted political and legal privileges, affect their feelings and thoughts and ways of looking at such vital issues of life as marriage and separation.

The Topic

The purpose of this study is to analyze the processes of change affecting upper caste educated women who are economically middle class and living in urban areas. The significance of dealing with these upper caste middle class women is that they were the major upholders of and vehicles for the traditional high status Sanskritic values and customs, yet they have also been subject to the greatest amount of change during the past century. Today, these are the women who are most likely to be educated and have the option of using this education to get a job at some time in their life. They still believe and retain their traditional customs and values; but also have acquired aspirations and opportunities associated with modernization and

industrialization. For example, De Souza reports that young women "advanced" in certain things like going to a co-educational college, still want parents to arrange their marriage. "Many want new opportunities, old securities, new freedom, and old protection" (De Souza, 1975:13).

A particularly sensitive indicator of how these contradictory feelings, and the normative systems they presuppose, are being handled is the incidence of divorce. Although the divorce rate in this class is still very low, the fact that suing for divorce to escape an intolerable marriage is being considered at all by such women and their supportive male relatives is itself an enormous change. The very thought that they could "resort to divorce or separation makes them more sure of themselves and gives them confidence that they could partially shape their own destiny" (Lipowsky, 1975:162).

The attitudes of middle class educated women, particularly educated working women, have changed considerably and have been more equalitarian. The attitudes of men also have been affected by the changing socio-economic situation. At least for their sisters, if not yet for their wives, they are more ready to accept equality of rights between men and women. Generally speaking, it is very difficult for women to go through a divorce alone without any male support from brothers or father. Today, men who are educated do not reject divorce, although the degree of acceptance, of course, varies (Lipowsky, 1975:160).

The Format

In order to study the views of urban educated middle class upper caste women on divorce, we will begin in Chapter II with the traditional high caste norms and Sanskritic values which they all have been brought up to respect. In Chapter III, we discuss the process of social change that has provided a competing set of norms and expectations: first, we deal with how women