



International Journal of Advanced Research & Higher Studies (IJARHS)

Perspectives on the Property Rights of Hindu Women in Bangladesh: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

In Bangladesh, Hindu women's property rights are less protected than those of other women and male family members. Bangladeshi law forbids discrimination based on gender, religion, or any other grounds. Hindu women only have a few property rights under the current legal system, which has not yet been changed by legislation. Bangladesh is required by international law to end all types of discrimination. By denying Hindu women property rights, Bangladesh transgresses both international law and the anti-discrimination clauses of its constitution. It analyzes and critically evaluates Bangladesh's domestic and international duties in light of the existing state of women's property rights in Bangladesh

Introduction

The significance of empowering women has long been emphasized in Bangladesh as a means of overcoming poverty. Despite making enormous economic contributions, women are socially less powerful than men. Currently, they are too busy to do their tasks. Women actively participate in their country's economic activities despite experiencing gender discrimination in almost every facet of life. There is discrimination everywhere, irrespective of social level or religious allegiance. Women's property rights are insufficiently established in Bangladesh, in our opinion. In Bangladesh, Hindu women only have a relatively small amount of property rights, which worsens their situation and is against international law.

Hindu law developed and was fully codified during the colonial era:

Sanatan, which in English is translated as "ancient" or "everlasting," is the Sanskrit term for the Hindu religion. Hindu legal experts maintain that the rule of law is crucial for the survival of dharma, or religion. One of the oldest legal systems in existence, Hindu law is renowned for its complexity, idealistic tenets, and logical coherence. Hindu law is said to have originated in the celestial regions. Through prayer, the ancient Hindu sages received this understanding from God. Hindu law is regarded as divine, mystical, and unchangeable in early Hindu literature. The efficiency of human organs has been confirmed by the highest authorities, therefore this cannot be disputed (Agarwala 1998). Manu declares:¹

¹Manu was accepted as the first expositor of law and his institutes are, by common tradition, entitled to a place of precedence among all the smritis. Even though the actual identity of Manu was not known, the extant form of Manusmriti was compiled in about 200 B.C. (Mulla 1986).

The Vedas, Smriti, Accepted Uses, and the Keeper of Man's Soul (Conscience) are Dharma's four most important symbols (Jabvala 4). Hindu law is thought to have its origins and highest authority in the Srutis. The foundational text of Hindu literature and law is this book. The word "sruti," which is Sanskrit for "heard," is believed to be God's verifiable and understandable Word. They claim to be precise imitations of Vedic teachings. Despite the Vedas being the most major and authoritative source of Hindu law, the Surutis do not contain many secular laws. The foundation of Hindu law is Smritis, sometimes referred to as Smritishastra or Dharmashastra. Here, we're referring to the knowledge that Rishis maintain and transmit to succeeding generations. The Smritis are recognized as trustworthy sources of knowledge regarding religious doctrine, morals, and ethics, just like the Srutis. It also offers a range of useful tips and Hindu laws that can be used in everyday life. He occasionally argued with Smritis, which led to strife. Different interpretations of the Smritis, also known as the Nibandha, have been offered by experts (such as Mulla 1986 and Alam 2004).

Long-standing customs were given legal standing by the Smritis' distinctive expressions, which show that Sadachara (usage or custom) is acknowledged as a source of law. As a result, rules and traditions had a big influence on how the Hindu legal system evolved (Jois 1990). Numerous regional norms and rules were developed as a result of the British development of Hindu law. It was difficult to establish uniform legal norms in many places (Agarwala 1998). Hindu law has only lately started to take shape as a result of British rule in India. The combined impact of the laws passed during the two centuries of British administration, however, was insufficient to materially modify Hindu law. When establishing the civil and criminal rules for this region, the British decided to preserve as much of Muslim and Hindu personal law as they could. Personal laws must be created right away, nevertheless. Hindu personal law was significantly influenced by European philosophy, and long-standing customs were being codified to create statute law. Many progressive improvements were implemented at this time, particularly those that backed the rights of women (Alam 2004). The Hindu legal system's intellectual foundation was periodically drastically affected by laws passed by the British administration (Agarwala 1998). The socioeconomic situation of Hindu women has been taken into account in significant legislative additions, updates, and amendments to Hindu personal law:

1. The Sati Regulation, 1829.
2. The Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act of 1856.
3. Hindu inheritance laws were altered by a statute that was put in place in 1919.
4. The Child Marriage Restraint Act was replaced in 1929.
5. Hindu Women's Property Rights Act, 1937.
6. The Hindu Married Women's Right to Separate Residence and Maintenance Act of 1946 is one such piece of legislation.

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN HINDU LAW

Men are required to respect and esteem women in Hindu society. This tasteful arrangement is described in a poem by Manu. He claims:

Women must be honored and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brother-in-law who desire their welfare. Where women are honored, there the Gods are pleased: but where they are not honored, no sacred rite yields rewards (Manusmriti chapter III verse 55-56)

Hindu women only hold positions of reverence and awe because women's rights are not mentioned in the religion's sacred writings. Hinduism holds a variety of viewpoints on how to respect both men and women. Hindu women's primary duty is to submit to men (Wadley 1977). (1977, Wadley). Manu proclaims-

By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent. (Manusmriti Chapter-v verse 147-148).

Gender differences were not present throughout the Vedic era. They could take part in several religious rites and enjoyed the same social position as men of the time. At the time, it was commonly known that many Hindu women had sharp minds and excelled in administration and mathematics. The decrease in the standing of women in society was caused by Manu, a legislator who prohibited women from taking part in a variety of religious rites. Because religion is the foundation of civilization, this religious freedom had a significant impact on how women were perceived by society as a whole. Women suffered the most in these civilizations when religious principles dominated inheritance and property rights. They suffered the most from the loss of their inheritance rights to the daughters.

Hindu women were officially granted access to their deceased husbands' possessions according to the Hindu Women's Title to Property Act, which the British passed in the nineteenth century. The idea of "the widow's restricted estate," which permits widows to keep the assets their departed spouses left behind with limitations on how they can dispose of them, developed about the same period. Unfortunately, Bangladesh's harsh restrictions on women's property rights reflect a long history of discrimination against them. Hindu women's property rights have not changed since British rule came to an end.

The situation of Hindu Women's Property Rights in Bangladesh

Hindu law regulates every aspect of private life, including marriage, adoption, intestate succession, gifts, and wills. In Bangladesh, the vast majority of Hindus adhere to Dayabhaga or Bengal School Hindu law. Hindu laws that were created under British colonial control govern property rights in Bangladesh. When these laws' provisions and the breadth and depth of women's property rights conflict, traditional Hindu law will be used. It is frequently said that as a result, the contemporary Hindu law in Bangladesh is essentially Anglo-Hindu law. Hindu women's property rights can be discussed in terms of either partial or whole ownership.

The former is referred to as her stridhana, whilst the latter is known as her woman's estate. Stridhana refers to a woman's property, specifically those over which she has complete control (Agarwal, 1998). Because they differ fundamentally from the other types of property that women own, they are frequently referred to as a woman's estate. The key differences between stridhana and a woman's estate are as follows:

- 1) The female heir's ability to dispose of assets and cannot alienate them due to legal limitations or the best interests of the estate. Stridhana, on the other hand, is free to do as she pleases with her personal possessions.
- 2) In Hindu law, the estate of a decedent woman passes to the heirs of the stridhana rather than the male possessor's successor. Agarwala (2000) asserts that women are by nature property.

The original concept behind Stridhana

The word "stridhana," which is a combination of the words "woman" and "property," is used to describe a lady's goods (Mulla 1986). Stridhana is the term used in modern Hindu law to describe acquiring or holding any other type of property over which a woman has complete control. As a result, the property is distributed to her heirs according to her instructions (Agarwala 1998).

Stridhana classifications

Manu defines stridhana as the gift of money or property given to a girl by her mother, father, and brother as a token of their affection before the wedding ceremony or bridal procession.

In general, the origin of the property, the woman's marital status (single, married, or widowed), and the school of Hindu law she belonged to at the time of acquisition would determine whether a particular type of property might be referred to as stridhana. (Jhabvala2009).

Stridhana is divided into three classes by Dayabhaga to account for succession.

- 1) Gifts that are "presented in the presence of the wedding fire" make up the yautaka.

- 2) The anvadheyaka, a document that lists the gifts and bequests the father made following the wedding.

The ayautaka also includes gifts and bequests made by family members other than the father after marriage, in addition to bequests made by family members, including the father, before marriage.

No matter how a woman gained her property through inheritance, gifts made at the partition, cash donations, gifts from strangers, technical prowess, or gifts of her husband's real estate Dayabhagga maintains that it is not stridhana. (Agarwala 2000)

A woman's capacity to control her Stridhana

Depending on whether a woman is a widow, a married woman, or a virgin, her stridhana rights may differ.

- 1) A Hindu woman is free to remove any stridhana at any time as long as she remains a virgin. She may be able to get rid of her stridhana while incarcerated, depending on the type she possesses.
- 2) Stridhana is divided into *saudayika*² and *non-saudayika*³ categories to accomplish this. She must liberate herself with the *saudayika* stridhana. Because she has total control over this stridhana, she is perfect. Only the husband's permission is required to dispose of *non-saudayika* stridhana. Even if there is any uncertainty, her husband is the rightful owner of this property and is free to do with it what he pleases.
- 3) During her widowhood, a Hindu widow is the only owner of all stridhana, regardless of when they were acquired.

Succession to Stridhana:

Male Sridhana heirs are sons, daughters, sons' sons, and any male descendants. Included are daughters, daughters-in-law, and other female Sridhana heirs. When a man inherits stridhana, he receives the entire sum and distributes it to his children; however, a woman only receives a portion of it when she inherits stridhana, and upon her passing, the remaining female stridhana heir receives the complete sum.

Inheritance of the heiress

Both men and women may give gifts to Hindu women.

The female heirs are given preference:

Only the widow, daughter, mother, father's mother, and father's father's mother are permitted to inherit males, according to the Dayabhaga School. Three more beneficiaries were added by the Hindu Law of Inheritance (Amendment) Act of 1929: the sister, the daughter of the daughter, and the daughter of the son. In the succession order, these three are permitted to succeed before a father's brother and after a father's father (s. 2 of the act). This law was passed when Bangladesh was under British rule and was upheld after Bangladesh gained independence. All Hindus living in Bangladesh who are subject to Mitakshara law are covered by the first part of the Hindu Law of Inheritance (Amendment) Act of 1929. (2). In Bangladesh, where the Dayabhaga School of Hindu law, as previously established, dominates the majority of the country's Hindu population, this Act has only a limited impact.

The widow's claim to the estate of her deceased husband:

Even though she is unable to claim a son, the widow is entitled to a portion equal to that of a son if her sons are divided, less any stridhana she may have received from her husband or father-in-law (Mullah 1986). According to Section 3 of The Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937, a Hindu widow has the same right to ask for a division of her husband's property as a male owner. If a Hindu man dies intestate and leaves a widow or widows, they are entitled to an inheritance similar to that of a son, per Section 3(1) of the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937. If a son has no

² Whatever is obtained by a married or unmarried girl, from the husband or parents, at the husband's or father's place, is called *saudayika*. (Agarwala 1998)

³ All other properties which are not *saudayika* are called *non-saudayika* (Agarwala 1998)

living sons, his widow will receive his inheritance. If a predeceased son's son's son or son's son's son is still alive, she shall receive the same amount as a son's son, according to Section 3(1) of the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937. According to Section 3 of the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937, a tiny portion of her husband's income is allocated to the estate of the Hindu woman, also known as the wife's estate. Due to the prohibition on alienation, this restricted interest enables a widow to possess the home for the remainder of her life. Hindu widows are prohibited from selling their possessions without a judge's approval. A woman may only inherit her husband's property if doing so would spiritually benefit her husband's soul while he was still alive, according to the Hindu Legal Texts. This was referred to as the scope of a Hindu woman's right to her deceased husband's property in the case of *Nurunnabi v. Jaynal Abedin*. It may not always be the case that a woman's various levels of immoral behavior lead to the disavowal of the marriage and de facto abdication of her responsibility as the surviving spouse's widow. The widow is ineligible for the estate because of her immorality and incapacity to support her deceased husband spiritually. A widow loses her right to her deceased husband's property if she marries again.

Certain limitations apply to the widow's right to her husband's property; for example, she is only permitted to sell it to meet what is known as "legal necessity," that is, to pay off her husband's debts, carry out deeds that contribute to his maintenance, carry out deeds that contribute to his spiritual welfare, and maintain the estate. Her life investment in the property resulted in it passing to her late husband's heirs rather than to her own.

The impact of a widow's second marriage on inheritance:

A long-standing prohibition on widow remarriage in British India was lifted by the Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act of 1856. Hindus in Bangladesh are now covered by this rule, therefore divorced women are now free to remarry. However, by doing so, the lady renounces her claim to the wealth her late husband amassed (Hindu Widows Remarriage Act, 1856, s 2). It is challenging to pinpoint the preamble of the Act's specific application because it has been the subject of numerous legal interpretations. Even though widow remarriage was common among Hindus in India who were regarded to be of a lower social level, only upper-class Hindus were prohibited from doing so. Hindu widows from lower castes who afterward remarried are therefore still qualified to receive their deceased husband's property. The judiciary was required to interpret the applicability of the aforementioned Act in several instances through a range of judgments.

For instance, after the Act was passed and regardless of whether they belonged to the upper castes, where such a marriage was previously forbidden, or the so-called lower castes, where such a marriage was common and accepted by custom, all Hindus were subject to the forfeiture of the deceased husband's estate upon remarriage provision of Section 2. According to the Allahabad High Court, anyone who was permitted to remarry under customary law before the 1856 Act's passing was exempt from its provisions (Lucy Carroll 1983). In Bangladesh, there is an ongoing debate on how the aforementioned Act should be interpreted legally. In the case of *Soudamini Ray Malakar v. Narendra Chandra Barman et al.*, the court ruled that regardless of her caste's traditions, a remarried widow forfeits her claim to her deceased husband's property. This notion is supported by both the Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act and Hindu law in general.

The court finally determined that section 2 of the Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act, 1856 did not apply when the marriage was performed in line with her caste's custom in the case of *Jaynal Abedin Khandakar et al. v. Badiuzzaman Mondal et al.* Tradition permitting, no property forfeiture is allowed unless the plaintiff can show that the widow's ex-property spouse's property has already been forfeited in the past. Because of this, it is still unknown if widows who remarry lose their deceased spouses' assets, regardless of cultural traditions.

A daughter's inheritance rights

For her father's estate, a daughter finishes sixth. In the event of the absence of a son, son's son, son's son's son, or widow, the property passes to the daughter (Akter and Abdullah 2007). Daughters are allowed to inherit from all widows after their deaths (Mulla 1986). Daughters are ranked below

widows of deceased sons and widows of deceased sons of deceased sons under the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937. Neither the unmarried nor the married daughter receives anything if a father passes away without leaving any sons or widows other than the widow of a predeceased son or the predeceased son of a predeceased son (Rakshit 2008). Before married daughters who have or are likely to have sons, unmarried daughters inherit their fathers' belongings. Women without children, mothers of only daughters, and female widows without husbands are not entitled to an inheritance (Mulla 1986). A daughter who is divorced and has a son is not included because she was married when her son was born. However, if the son-in-law was prepared and qualified to adopt while the father was still living and adopted the daughter after the father's death, the daughter is entitled to inherit (Mulla 1986). The estate will be evenly divided between any two or more living daughters. Any daughter has the right to voluntarily and irrevocably relinquish her claim to an inheritance, without affecting the rights of the other daughters (Mulla 1986). An impure daughter is not allowed to inherit from her father under the Dayabhaga law. However, now that she's bought the property, she can't lose it by acting immorally (Mulla 1986). The girl inherits a modest share of her father's estate. When she passes away, her inheritance is given to her father's replacement rather than to her heirs (Mulla 1986). When an unmarried lady passes away leaving her father's estate, it is only passed on to her son and married sister; the unmarried sister is not included because she has or will have male children (Rakshit2008). Legal rights of additional female inheritors Hindu succession law declares that a mother is an heiress. If none of the other named heirs is still alive when she inherits the title from her father, she will not. A dirty lady cannot properly raise her son. She was unable to obtain the estate by less moral means, so she is unable to give it up. Even if she later got married, she is still eligible to inherit from the son (Rakshit 2008). The mother may also receive the daughter's stridhana. Additionally, the property of the great-grandparents' grandson may pass to the paternal grandmother and great-grandmother (Mulla 1986). Female heiresses receive less money in terms of assets than male heiresses (Mulla 1986).

Discrimination as to gender as well as to religion

The People's Republic of Bangladesh's Constitution forbids discrimination on the grounds of gender and religion in a number of its sections. Non-discrimination based on race, gender, ethnicity, caste, and other traits is recognized as a basic right for all citizens under Articles 28 and 29 of the Bangladeshi Constitution. State-sponsored discrimination based on race, religion, caste, gender, or place of birth is prohibited by Article 28 of the Constitution.

Women must have equal access to all political and social areas as males. On the sole basis of their religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, no citizen will be subject to any handicap, liability, limitation, or condition affecting their access to a public pleasure area or resort or their eligibility for admission to a school. Without a doubt, Bangladesh must enact laws or put policies in place to ensure the abolition of all types of prejudice, regardless of the justifications stated in the state's final legislation. This does not, however, preclude the state from passing particular legislation to assist any minority group, including women, kids, and families. Hindu women's property rights in Bangladesh are unfair not only based on gender but also based on religion, in contrast to Muslim or Christian women's property rights. Muslim women have the right to inherit from their husbands, fathers, kids, etc. She is not prevented from inheriting because a male classmate is present; nevertheless, the proportion may vary based on the conditions. She can still inherit with male peers (Rashid 1996). Christian women in Bangladesh are protected by the Succession Act of 1925. A Christian widow is also eligible to inherit with her children, and there is no difference in inheritance between a son and a daughter. Both male and female heirs of similar rank are accorded the same rights (The Succession Act, 1925 ss 33-40). Muslim women who inherit property have full control over it and are allowed to dispose of it, just like Christian women do. When they pass away, the property is given to their heirs rather than the heirs of the person they purchased it from. This makes it straightforward to argue that a Hindu woman's property rights include protection from both gender and religious discrimination.

International anti-discrimination obligations must be upheld by Bangladesh

As a signatory to several agreements that guarantee women have equal economic rights regardless of their gender or religious beliefs, Bangladesh has commitments to the international world. One of these responsibilities is to protect women's equal property rights.

All the rights listed in this section are guaranteed to all Bangladeshi citizens by Article 7 of the UDHR⁴, regardless of their gender or religious affiliation. According to Article 17 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to possess property.

Among the 160 nations that have accepted the CEDAW⁵ treaty, which strives to end all forms of discrimination against women, Bangladesh is one. The agreement was approved by Bangladesh on November 6, 1984. Bangladesh first put restrictions on Articles 2, 13.1[a], 16.1[c], and [f] because of its orthodox religious position. Later it was determined that Articles 13.1(a), 16.1(c), and (f) were insufficient. Despite this, the Article 2 reservation, which is thought of as the parent article of all others, is still in force.

The ICESCR⁶, which calls on all parties to end discrimination against women, is allegedly endorsed and signed by Bangladesh's administration, according to that country. According to Article 2 of the Covenant, rights shall be exercised regardless of one's national or social background, wealth, birth, gender, language, religion, or any other status (2).

Bangladesh declares that it understands the necessity of safeguarding the economic, social, and cultural rights of both men and women under Article 3 of the Covenant. In light of the current circumstance affecting the property rights of Hindu women, Bangladesh's failure to maintain these commitments is obvious. One of the most significant CEDAW Articles, which demands that every state party have legislation and initiatives addressing discrimination against women, has drawn objections from Bangladesh. This has already been shown. Religious emotions are the driving force behind reservations in Bangladesh. It highlights the political system's inability to create laws ensuring everyone's equality in the ownership of property without also depriving Hindu women of their rights.

The reformation of property rights of Hindu women was altered by the 1956 Act:

Women's property rights under Hindu personal law in India underwent significant and substantial gains during the postcolonial period with the passing of The Hindu Succession Act in 1956. Intestate succession is currently examined by Hindu law from a distinct and formal standpoint. This Act creates a controlled and inclusive inheritance system and applies to everyone who self-identifies as a Hindu. Once more, Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists in India are included in this ban (The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, s 2). All earlier succession laws that were in force when the Act was passed are repealed (The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, s 4). The widow, son, and daughter of the deceased also receive equal honor and a share of his or her wealth (The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, s 10). She is now the sole owner of all of her goods, regardless of how she acquired them, as Hindu women are no longer subject to a limited estate (The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, s 14). Hindu women who pass away without making a will leave behind their husbands, fathers, parents, and children (The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, s 15). Illnesses, physical flaws, and defects are no longer reasons to

⁴ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a declaration adopted by United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_Declaration_of_Human_Rights, last accessed 23 December 2022.

⁵ The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted by United Nations General Assembly on 18 December 1979. The Convention emphasizes that discrimination against women violates the principle of equality of rights and respect for human dignity. <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/> last accessed 24 December 2022.

⁶ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is a multilateral treaty adopted by United Nations General Assembly on 16 December 1966. The Covenant aims to ensure the protection of economic, social, and cultural rights. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/human-rights-and-health> last accessed 23 December 2022.

prevent someone from inheriting. Under the current provisions of the Act, a few female heirs' unchastity, conversion to a different faith, or rejection of their caste are no longer grounds for disinheritance (The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, s 28). Hindus make up the majority in India, which has faced criticism for big and fundamental changes to the Hindu family law that governs property ownership (Mulla 1986). Making things better for Hindu women may be challenging given the minority status of Hindus in Bangladesh.

Concluding Thoughts

Since British colonial rule, Hindu personal law has not changed. As a result, Bangladesh's current laws governing Hindu women's property rights fall short of the needs of the nation. A vital human right that any country must respect is gender equality. Due to religious reasons, Hindu law frequently disregards women's property rights and other difficulties. Politicians are not always to fault for the issue; the Hindu community's patriarchal mentality also contributes to it. The orthodox Hindu community holds that because Hinduism has divine roots, it cannot be altered by the use of force. However, modern Hindu culture anticipates the legislation that will result in improvements, much like other politically aware citizens. Thus, achieving a balance between the conflicting objectives ought to be difficult. Opposition and criticism are inevitable when attempts are made to incorporate progressive changes to Hindu law from different sources. This needs to be considered if any modifications are to be respectful of Hindu tradition, culture, and religion.

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