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Schooling, Celibacy and Self-Culture: The Child Widows of Punjab, 1900-1915

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Schooling, Celibacy and Self-Culture: The Child Widows of Punjab, 1900-1915[1]

Smita Gandotra

Abstract:

This paper argues that the Hindi periodical *Panchal Pandita*(1897-1913), published for the students of the Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jalandhar, was critical in scripting a distinctive typology: of the celibate widow as teacher. It assesses the periodical's sustained interest in 'the widow problem' against the backdrop of the Arya Samaj (to which the school bore allegiance) and educational discourse (on the imperative to train widows as teachers). A key element in the rehabilitation efforts of widows was the institutionalization of celibacy (*brahmacharya*), within a broader regimen of self-culture. The injunction to observe celibacy was understood as self-restraint, but also aligned with serving the community. Fundamentally, it enabled young widows to commit themselves fully to a life of learning and teaching. Some of the questions this paper asks are as follows: What are the implications of the practice of celibacy for the student collective, comprising widows, married and unmarried students? Is it a regulatory practice, or a strategic mechanism? Are the elements of this self-culture aligned with Dayanand Saraswati's writings on the matter? Or do they bear any synonymity with wider anticolonial projects of resistance?

Key Words: Widows, print culture, education, gender, social reform

In January 1912, *Panchal Pandita* (1897-1913), a Hindi periodical for the students of the Kanya Mahavidyalaya (KMV), Jalandhar, published an obituary commiserating the death of a young widow in Gujranwala. It informed its readers that she had donated all her silk clothes and jewellery to the school.[2] Why did Sushila Devi bequeath the signs of her married life to an educational institution? This essay attempts to arrive at an answer to this question by suggesting that *Panchal Pandita* was crucial in scripting the typology of the "respectable widow" as a teacher within educational discourse. The adjective "respectable," first employed by colonial

[1] This paper is a revised version of the talk delivered at the Centre for Contemporary Studies, PMML, Teen Murti House, New Delhi on December 23, 2025.

[2] *Sampadak*, '*Kanya Mahavidyalya Samachar*,' *Panchal Pandita* 15, no. 3 (1912): 27.

officials, accumulates multiple qualifiers through this analysis, and begins to suggest a quality that is acquired through ritualized practices of the self.[3]

From the earliest years of its establishment, widows were trained at the KMV, alongside other students from the school, to become teachers. This transformational arc is recorded with great detail in the pages of *Panchal Pandita.* In 1900, within four years of the KMV's founding, the editors of its periodical announced the *Bhagvati Vidhva Sahayak Bhandar* (Bhagvati widow relief fund), a fund to support and educate child widows. By 1906, the founders opened a widows' home, *Vidhva Bhavan* (Widows' home), adjacent to the school. While the relief fund offered stipends to girls above the age of twelve, the widows' home seemingly had no such stipulation, and may have accommodated younger girls or older women. Was the KMV tacitly opening its doors to widows of all ages to learn and teach? The term "child widow" is therefore employed broadly in this analysis, as a placeholder, indicating a vulnerable population.

Panchal Pandita's publication in Hindi, and slant towards Sanskrit, signals the assertion of an Arya Samaj credo within the plural linguistic and communitarian publics of Punjab.[4]With varying degrees of emphasis, the periodical's investment in 'the widow problem' was broadly shared by the Muslim and Sikh communities of Punjab. The Urdu periodical *Tahzib-i-Niswan* (1898-1950s), from Lahore, serialised many Urdu novels which foreground the figure of the vulnerable widow. In these novels, although marital incompatibility is the "critical problem", the authors "portray widowhood or death as the outcome of coerced marriages." In several instances, education becomes the means through which widows transition out of vulnerability.[5]A parallel can also be noted with the Punjabi journal *Punjabi Bahn* (1907-1918), published by the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya at Ferozepur. A lively debate on widow remarriage within the Sikh community unfolded in its pages.[6]

While implicitly aligning with the reformist energies within Punjab, the editors of *Panchal Pandita* were more keenly attentive to rehabilitation efforts much further afield. Initiatives to assist and educate young widows by a wide range of patrons, across the reformist spectrum, were chronicled in *Panchal Pandita* – the Maharani of Mysore, Pandita Ramabai, Sister Nivedita, Behramji Malabari, Sasipada Bannerjee, Kamala Satthiandan and Dhondo

[3] W. W. Hunter, *Report of the Indian Education Commission*, (Superintendent of Government Printing, 1883), 526.
[4] On the Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi periodicals published in Punjab for women see Arti Minocha, 'Defining Modernity through Education: Women's Responses from Colonial Punjab,' *South Asian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 3, no. 5 (2022).
[5] Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 105-110; Asiya Alam, *Women, Islam and Familial Intimacy in Colonial South Asia*, (Brill, 2021), 87-88, 93-94.
[6] Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 123-126; Mini Sandhu, A Comparative Analysis of the *Panchal Pandita* and the *Punjabi Bhain* from a Gender Perspective, *Journal of Punjab Studies* 20, no. 13 (2013).

Keshav Karve. The KMV's relief fund was, therefore, explicitly aligned with transregional trends noted in the pages of its periodical, particularly the widows' home established by Karve.[7]

The education, and in some instances employability, of the widow links some of the most poignant life writings by widows in late colonial India. Parvati Athavale's (1870-1955) education at various makeshift schools, after she is widowed, allows her to teach at and administer the widows' home at Hingne, alongside Dhondo Keshav Karve.[8] In contrast, in colonial Bengal, in deference to the cultural belief that "a literate woman was destined to be a widow," Rassundari Devi (1810-1899) learned how to read scripture in a clandestine way. She disclosed her skills to her widowed sisters-in-law only after she herself was widowed, and then taught them all to read.[9]Widows in Muslim communities were often enlisted to teach children how to read the Quran. Ashrafunnisa Begum's (1840-1903) memoir mentions a young Pathan widow who visits her home in Bijnor and is her first teacher. Later in life, when Ashrafunissa is widowed, she takes a teaching position at the Victoria Girls' School in Lahore.[10] Many similar instances alert us to the attentiveness with which widows embrace (or disclose) their desire for an education.[11] And yet, our understanding of this particular conjuncture remains, at best, uneven.

The founders of the KMV, Lala Devraj and Lala Munshi Ram, were interested in enabling an advanced education for their students, so that they may become teachers. On this matter they found themselves at odds with the Lahore based Arya Samaj.[12] Several of their detractors, like Lala Lajpat Rai, although involved with the Dayanand Anglo Vedic College for men, dismissed the idea to expand the girls' school to a high school as "premature."[13]From its earliest years the KMV set itself apart from primary girls' schools in the region, and aimed to become a "first class institution with a good boarding house" that supplies "properly trained mistresses" to other girls' schools.[14] The school was soon recognized regionally for its training

[7] See Savitri, '*Vidhva Bhavan Puna*,' *Panchal Pandita* 9, no. 1, (1905): 18; *Panchal Pandita* 9, no. 1, (1905): 17-18; Hemant Kumari Chaudharani, '*Seva Parayana Nivedita*,' *Panchal Pandita* 15, no. 5, (1912): 23-26.
[8] Parvati Athavale, *My Story: The Autobiography of a Hindu Widow*, tr. Rev. Justin E. Abbott, (G. P. Putnam, 1930), 19-26; Padmini Sengupta, *Pandita Ramabai Sarawati: Her Life and Work*, (Asia Publishing House, 1970), 185-191; Uma Chakravarty, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, (Kali, 1998), 277-281.
[9] Tanika Sarkar, 'A Book of Her Own. A Life of her Own: Autobiography of a Nineteenth-Century Woman,' *History Workshop, Colonial and Post-Colonial History* 36 (Autumn 1993): 36, 57.
[10] Muhammadi Begum, *A Most Noble Life: The Biography of Ashrafunnisa Begum* (1840-1903), Trans. C. M. Naim, (Orient Blackswan, 2022), 7-33.
[11] Janaki Nair, *Women and Colonial Law: A Feminist Social History*, 2nd ed, (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 63-65.
[12] Kenneth Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19th-century Punjab*, 1976, (Manohar, 2006), 104. See also J. T. F. Jordens, *Swami Shraddhananda: His Life and Causes*, (OUP, 1981), 29-37.
[13] MadhuKishwar, 'The Daughters of *Aryavarta*,' 1986, rpt. *Women and Social Reform in India*, Volume 1, Eds. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, (Permanent Black, 2007), 173.
[14] See *Sampadak*, *Panchal Pandita*, 4, no. 1, (1900): 22.

of pupil-teachers, that is, of students who began to teach during or soon after their schooling years.

Existing scholarship on the KMV and its periodical has emphasized the Arya Samaj's paradoxical project to educate women. According to this analytical strain, the educational paradigm adopted at the KMV merely reinforced the conventional social roles Hindu women inherited in late colonial Punjab.[15] While this observation is incontrovertible, and holds true for many similar experiments in girls' schools, we still need to ask how lived practices at the student residence, designated an *ashram*, were experienced by a population comprising widow students, alongside unmarried and married students. How did these practices enable students, particularly widows, to consider lives outside the domestic fold? Even when we acknowledge that the school was opening doors for its students to become teachers and healthcare workers, that transition is not always emphatically explored.[16]By bringing focus to the widow students this essay offers an alternative lens from which to understand the institutional mechanisms that encouraged students at the KMV to consider a life in teaching.

From the earliest issues of *Panchal Pandita*, we note the presence of three narratives – of celibacy (*brahmacharya*), service (*seva*) and charity (*dan*) – in the KMV's success story. Tethered to an Arya Samaj ideological bulwark, these practices signal, at some level, a strategic pragmatism in the founders of the KMV. The school's insistence on a vow of celibacy – *brahmacharya* – through schooling and sometimes a little beyond, delayed and deferred marriages among the unmarried students, and also protected its resident student population of young widows from the charge of moral corruption. The second and third imperatives, *seva* and *dan*, ensured the KMV's financial autonomy through its early, struggling years. The requirements for skilled and unskilled labour were fulfilled by the students, and framed as *seva*. Students and teachers also travelled far and wide to solicit donations, *dan*, for their school.

Panchal Pandita's invocation of *brahmacharya* and *seva* may seem grimly reminiscent of the "social death" visited upon upper caste Hindu widows in colonial Maharashtra and Bengal. The privations, ignominy and psychological trauma suffered by upper caste widows has been extensively detailed in their life writings. Vehemently denied the option of a second marriage, even where legal reform allowed it, with very little recourse to a maintenance, young

[15] Kishwar, 'The Daughters of *Aryavarta*,' 298-340.
[16] Mahima Manchanda, 'Contested Domains: Restructuring Education and Religious Identity in Sikh and Arya Samaj Schools in Punjab,' in *New Perspectives in the History of Indian Education*, Ed. Parimala Rao, (Orient Blackswan, 2014), 137-138.

widows were surveilled by the extended family and frequently suspected of illicit liaisons. Subsisting on a meagre diet, they were forced into lifelong celibacy and shunned at family festivities. This state of complete dependence enabled large households to exploit the widow's unpaid, often strenuous, labour.[17] Additionally, in some instances, celibate widowhood was reinforced as a "conservative" response to debates over widow remarriage. The widow's celibacy, her "self-chosen abdication of all pleasure", began to be eulogised as "aching pain" for a beloved husband.[18]

However, the lived practices of celibacy and service are, to some extent, reframed in the context of a school for girls. This analysis of *Panchal Pandita* provides a necessary prequel to what we know of the 'saintly' widow-educators of Benares in the 1920s and 1930s. Nita Kumar alerts us to the asceticism observed by these women and suggests that their "saintliness" must be interpreted as "traditional but politically mature." She notes how the symbols of "sainthood" practiced by the widow-educators are "totally within the accepted discourse," and appear traditional. However, they are deployed in a manner that allows for their "discursive displacement" such that the consequences are "subversive".[19] Therefore, a widow student's commitment to ascetic life practices, within educational discourse, suggests a desire to reconstruct and reassemble the visible signs of a widowed life, in order to pursue educational and professional goals.

Our focus in this essay is quite specifically on the institutional lived practice of *brahmacharya* (not *seva*, which requires an equally engaged assessment). Traditionally, *brahmacharya* precedes the transition into married life for upper caste men and implies a period of "religious studentship." The student was expected to practice abstinence in what he wears and eats, while living within an *ashram*. In the case of *Panchal Pandita*, the insistence on a vow of celibacy derives from the writings of Swami Dayanand Saraswati. The periodical mentions by name the students who take a vow to remain celibate (*brahmacharyavrat*). At the same time, the preoccupation with *brahmacharya* cannot be isolated to the Arya Samaj. *Brahmacharya* is also understood more broadly in terms of chastity, self-restraint and a commitment to ascetic practices.[20] It was frequently invoked as an element of self-culture in

[17] Chakravarty, *Rewriting History*, 246-288; Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*, (Palgrave, 2001), 298-320.
[18] Tanika Sarkar, 'Wicked Widows: Law and Faith in Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere Debates,' in *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia*, ed. Anindita Ghosh, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 115.
[19] Nita Kumar, 'Women, Education and Social Change in Twentieth Century Benares,' *Economic and Political Weekly* (April 27, 1991): WS 23.
[20] R. S. McGregor, *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, (OUP, 1993), 752; Syamsundara Dasa, *Hindi Sabdasagar*, (Varanasi, 1965-1975), 3587, dsal.uchicago.edu.

late colonial India, drawing its energy from transregional anticolonial assertions of indigeneity and moral authority.

In *Panchal Pandita*'s pages the typology of the celibate, respectable widow begins to offer the paradigmatic constituents of a new professional identity – of the woman teacher, *adhyapika*. It was the widow student, absolved of familial responsibilities and committed to celibacy, who was the most likely to inhabit the identity of the pupil-teacher in a very public way and over the longest period. We have had some assessment of principled widowhood embodied in the star pupil of the KMV, Shrimati Savitri Devi, who became the school's first woman headmistress. It alerts us to a 'reworked' model of ascetic widowhood, now being appropriated by educational discourse.[21]However, instead of focusing on one or two exceptional students, it is instructive to allow trace elements of the lives of several students to cohere in this analysis. The editors of *Panchal Pandita* created a rhetorical framework that legitimized the education and financial independence of young widows. As we excavate the term *brahmacharya*, we realise that this practice becomes the grammar of the Hindu widow's professional life, her bid for respectability, oftentimes to mixed results.

The Bhagvati Widow Relief Fund and educational discourse

The Bhagvati Widow Relief Fund was instituted in November 1900 to train widows as teachers for a period of four years.[22] Mai Bhagvati, in whose memory the relief fund was instituted, although not a widow, lived and travelled widely as an unpartnered woman, preaching for and promoting the Arya Samaj. Disappointed with her marital home, where her interest in reading was regarded with suspicion and her books consigned to the fire, she chose to educate herself entirely through her own initiative.[23]*Panchal Pandita*'s narration of Mai Bhagvati's life story presented to its widow students, the possibility of a professional life as a teacher and preacher.

In the year the widow relief fund was instituted at the KMV, J. Sime, the Director of Public Instruction in Punjab, drafted an extended report on the state of education in Punjab stating that only 1.7 in every 100 girls were in some system of education in all of Punjab. Amritsar (1,479), Sialkot (1,048), Rawalpindi (931) and Lahore (907) had more girls' schools

[21] See Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities: Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab*, (Oxford University Press, 2002), 104-109.
[22] *Sampadak*, '*Bhagvati Vidhva Sahayak Bhandarke Niyam*,' *Panchal Pandita* 4, no. 1, (1900): 7-9.
[23] Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities*, 107, footnote 78.

than Jalandhar (792). Most of the education was restricted to the primary level, with only fourteen Middle and two High schools being on record in the entire province.[24]At this juncture, the KMV was one of fourteen Middle schools, with classes initially till level five and later extending to level eight.

The various Christian missions took the lead in educating girls in Punjab. Evangelical work in Lahore began in 1863, and by 1867 an English missionary started zenana classes for Hindus and Muslims. The instruction was in Urdu. For various reasons, these schools had an accelerated dropout rate and were closed in 1899. Several schools were also established for native Christian girls.[25] Miss Carpenter, a school inspector, remarks on the "sense and tact" of missionary teachers but also admits that "their usefulness may sometimes be impaired by religious over-zeal."[26]

During these years education records constantly complain of a scarcity of teachers in girls' schools. There is as yet no Normal School for women (which would open in January 1905 at Lahore) and by 1901 education reports record a mere thirty-five women under training to become teachers.[27] A majority of those who train to become teachers are either Christian or Muslim, "knowing only Urdu." They are concentrated in the cities of Lahore and Amritsar and "dislike moving to a strange place." [28]These observations alert us to the network of "denominational" schools within colonial Punjab. Each community – Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh –took the initiative to educate girls principally within their own demographic. This pattern was seems to have been carried over from precolonial times when girls were taught to read scripture at home across the different communities of Punjab.[29] The pattern of denominational schools is noticeable with reference to boys as well, where, especially in Jalandhar, it was seen to occasion discriminatory practices and escalating sectarian tensions.[30]

W. W. Hunter's review of the state of education in 1883introduces the category of the "respectable widow" as a critical stakeholder in educational discourse. He complains that

[24] J. Sime, *Report on Public Instruction in the Punjab and its Dependencies for the Year 1899-1900*, (The Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1900), 70-73.
[25] Michelle Maskiell, *Women Between Cultures: The Lives of Kinnaird College Alumnae in British India*, Syracruse, (Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs Syracruse University, 1984), 18-20.
[26] G. W. Leitner, *The History of Indigenous Education in the Panjab Since Annexation and in 1882*, (Superintendent of Government Printing, 1882), 106.
[27] J. F. Connolly, *Report on Public Instruction in Punjab and its Dependencies for 1901-1902*, (Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1903), 23.
[28] Sime, *Public Instruction in Punjab for 1899-1900*, 77; Connolly, *Public Instruction in Punjab for 1901-1902*, 24.
[29] Preeti, 'The Transformation of Schooling in Colonial Punjab,' in *New Perspectives in the History of Indian Education*, Ed. Parimala Rao, (Orient Blackswan, 2014), 271.
[30] J. C. Godley, *Report on Public Instruction in Punjab and its Dependencies for 1911-1912*, (Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1913), 51-52.

"[r]espectable widows were not found to be available in any numbers, although an attempt was made in that direction . . ."[31] It has been suggested that the adjectival force of 'respectable' indicates a desire to employ widows from upper caste and upper class families, who would lend respectability to poorly attended girls' schools established by the colonial government.[32] As part of the same review exercise, Miss Francis, an inspector of girls' schools in Punjab, suggests that a teachers training institute for widows would serve the region well. This suggestion is echoed at educational conferences in 1902 and 1903 as well.[33] However, the colonial government's policies with regard to recruiting widows into the teaching profession were riddled with contradictions and disincentives. For instance, an inspector of schools points out that widows are required to outrank other students before they are considered worthy of stipendiary aid.[34]

The project to school widows into the teaching profession aligns the KMV with the colonial government. Despite the scarcity and unevenness of records, the pages of *Panchal Pandita* record seven widows in a student population of 134 in 1898. This number grows to thirty by 1913, when the school's student population is 350.[35] This small percentage does not include the widow students who could not be accommodated at the student residence because of paucity of space. It can be argued that the percentage of widows who were trained at the KMV appears negligible. At the same time, to interpolate from an allied context, it allows us to suggest that this pedagogical experiment in all likelihood generated "historical resonances beyond its immediate context".[36]

Quite naturally, the KMV's reputation for training Hindu women teachers caught the attention of the colonial authorities. *Panchal Pandita* records the visit of J. Sime to the KMV in 1901. He noted that it was a "first class central institution . . . which would supply . . . teachers."[37] In 1911 special notice is taken of the widows' home at the KMV: "This institution has served as a model to other Hindu boarding schools . . . The widows are educated entirely at the expense of the school authorities in order that they may become teachers . . ."[38]From

[31] Hunter, *Report of the Indian Education Commission*, 526.
[32] Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities,* 106.
[33] Bell, *Public Instruction in Punjab for 1902-1903*, 35; W. Bell, *Public Instruction in Punjab and its Dependencies for 1903-1904*, (Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1905), 2, 40.
[34] W. Bell, *Report on Public Instruction in Punjab and its Dependencies for 1906-1907*, (Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1908), Appendix, vii.
[35] *Sampadak*, '*Kanya Mahavidyalaya Samachar*,' *Panchal Pandita* 9, no. 11, (1906): 23-24.
[36] Sarkar, 'Wicked Widows,' 89.
[37] Connolly, *Public Instruction in Punjab for 1901-1902*, 24; Bell, *Public Instruction in Punjab for 1906-1907*, 31.
[38] Godley, *Progress of Education in Punjab 1911-1912*, 43.

1900-1910, the KMV regularly recruited teachers from its student population. By 1910 they claim to have trained approximately fifty teachers (among who are also widows) who have travelled to different parts of the country to teach in schools. The claim about sending teachers beyond Punjab is to some extent corroborated by the fact that the school was also drawing students not just from within Punjab, but from Bengal, Kathiavar, Bihar, Bombay and Balochistan.[39]

The education department's search for "respectable widows" and the KMV's pedagogical experiment are a response to a dire shortage of women teachers in colonial north India. These imperatives occur at a time of severe economic and social hardship for women in colonial Punjab.

Widows in colonial Punjab

Data from the 1881 Census showed that seventeen percent of the female population in British India were widows. Punjab did not record the highest numbers of widows; the number here was lower than in other regions, like Madras and Bengal. This may have been in part because of the low sex ratio in the region, or because widow remarriage was practiced widely among the peasant communities of the region, and was upheld as customary law. There was no prohibition against widows marrying a second time among Muslims, Sikhs and the lower castes in the region, who vastly outnumbered upper caste Hindus.[40] Therefore, with specific reference to Punjab, the absolute number of widows decreased over time, and in successive Census reports.[41]

In the ten years between the 1901 and the 1911 Census, roughly coterminous with the KMV's pedagogical experiment, Punjab experienced severe epidemics and natural disasters, which resulted in larger numbers of widows, across all communities. In absolute numbers, the records show a decrease in the number of widows, but an increase in the number of child widows in Punjab between the years 1881 and 1931. They also indicate that the percentage of widows was higher in Jalandhar, Ambala and Ferozepur as compared to Lahore, Amritsar and Ludhiana.[42] Upper caste widows, fallen upon hard times, had few avenues for employment. They were often able to sustain themselves by spinning cotton or grinding corn. The Punjab Census of 1901 reported that women in need of employment were often reduced to "indefinite

[39] *Sampadak*, '*Kanya Mahavidyalaya Samachar*,' *Panchal Pandita* 13, no. 7 (1910): 24-25.
[40] Reeta Grewal, 'Widows in North-Western India under Colonial Rule,' in *Social Transformation in North-Western India during the Twentieth Century*, ed. Chetan Singh, (Manohar, 2010), 361, 362, endnote 8.
[41] Grewal, 'Widows in North-Western India,' 361.
[42] Grewal, 'Widows in North-Western India,' 361-364.

and disreputable" or "menial occupations."[43] This explains the observations about widows made by the Superintendent of the Census of the Punjab in 1911:

> The present-day thought has led to a widow now being looked upon as an un-productive encumbrance. Her presence at certain occasions of rejoicing and at the celebration of certain ceremonies has come to be looked upon as ominous . . . Every now and then one hears of attempts to quietly put a young widow out of the way.[44]

Newspapers in Punjab carried various kinds of reportage on widows from across the country. Census statistics, instances of conversion, salacious accounts of affairs and infanticide were deployed in order to police widows as well as generate support for the practice of widow remarriage.[45] The preoccupation with widow remarriage in the various print publics can be traced back to the Hindu Remarriage Act XV of 1856, championed by Ishvar Chandra Vidyasagar, which enabled a widow of "full age" to remarry. There was a perceptual misfit here: between what liberal reformers and the colonial state attempted to 'reform' and how widows viewed their own circumstances. Testimonials and autobiographies of widows often reveal that they did not see a second marriage as a "resolution of their problems." In fact, the provisions of the 1856 Act were particularly unfortunate in regions like Punjab where several communities allowed widows to remarry, and widows were entitled to the property of their husband. In sum: "Universally applying a law that was intended to facilitate remarriage among a small section of upper caste Hindus produced regressive material consequences for the majority of castes among whom widow marriage was customarily practiced."[46]

Although customary law in Punjab recognized the right of widows to marry again, it remained a fraught matter. The Punjab Laws Act of 1872 gave precedence to observing *rivaj-i-am*, or the record of customs, on all matters related to widows, including remarriage. The question regarding widow marriage was not a question of caste or religion, but of socio-economic criteria. The wealthier and more landed caste groups – Jats, Gujars, Ahirs and Rors – allowed the second marriage of widows through the custom of *karewa* (where a widow 'married' her husband's brother). It was considered as legitimate and binding as a *nikah*, *phera* or *anandkaraj*. The widow's second marriage was less a matter of caste, and more of

[43] Qtd. In Kishwar, 'The Daughters of *Aryavarta*,' 304.
[44] Pandit Harikishan Kaul, Compiler, Census of India 1911, Vol XIV: Punjab, Part 1, 1912, 234, qtd. in Grewal, 'Widows in North-Western India,' 359-360.
[45] *Selections from Vernacular Newspapers Published in the Punjab, North Western Provinces, Oudh and Central Provinces Received upto 9 August 1886*, p. 572; *Selections from the Vernacular Newspapers Published in the Punjab, North Western Provinces, Oudh, Central Provinces and Berar, Received upto 6 August 1881*, p. 451; *Selections from Vernacular Newspapers Published in the Punjab, North Western Provinces, Oudh and Central Provinces*, *Received upto 18 June 1881*, p. 351.
[46] Janaki Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India: A Social History*, (Kali, 1996), 53-71; Nair, *Women and Colonial Law*, 62.

immovable property, "jealously watched" by her marital family. It was not uncommon for family members to approach administrators and district officials to prevent a widow from marrying a "stranger." The only condition under which she was permitted to marry again was if she married within the family. In which case, she also forfeited her right over her deceased husband's property.[47] The colonial state began routinely rejecting petitions from widows who resisted efforts to remarry within the family. To put it simply, the colonial state enabled the "patrilineal hold" over property.[48]

In colonial Punjab, while customary law recognized a wide spectrum of 'marriage' alliances, forged informally, these were now being disputed in court. While in some cases the custom of *karewa*, practiced among the Jat community in Punjab, entitled a widow to her husband's property, the different circumstances of a *dharel* (an upper caste woman for whom a bride price had been paid) invalidated her claim to maintenance after her 'husband's' death. Therefore, customary law in relation to widows also seems to have been inconsistently applied in legal decisions. The examples of "different grades of marriages" suggests that the circumstances that would customarily be understood to entitle a widow to a share in her husband's property were now being disputed in court. "Secondary alliances" which had earlier required "little or no ceremony" were now being delegitimized. Therefore, many more women were finding themselves in a financially "precarious situation" after the death of their husband.[49] The shifting winds in these matters results in a complete transition away from customary law to Hindu law by the 1920s in Punjab.

The Punjab Arya Samaj remained divided on the matter of widow remarriage. Swami Dayanand Saraswati addressed the matter of widows and widowers in an extended chapter on the married life in *Satyarth Prakash* (1875). His arguments against widow remarriage are emphatic and principally hinge on the question of patrilineal property and inheritance. "If a widow re-marries," he argues, "many a noble family will be blotted out of existence, and its property destroyed." He supported the marriage of "virgin widows," with a caveat, that she "marry the younger or elder brother of her deceased husband."[50] Suggesting, as mentioned previously, the general interest in securing the patrilineal line of inheritance.

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[47] Grewal, 'Widows in North-Western India,' 364-375. See also Prem Chowdhry, *The Veiled Woman: Shifting Gender Relations in Rural Haryana, 1880-1990*, (OUP, 1994), 74-119.
[48] Nair, *Women and Law*, 53-71; Nair, *Women and Colonial Law*, 69.
[49] Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities*, 99-103.
[50] Swami Dayanand Saraswati, *Light of Truth or An English Translation of the Satyarth Prakash, the Well-Known Work of Swami Dayanand Saraswati*, tr. Chiranjiva Bharadwaja, (Imperial Printing Works, 3rd Ed, 1927), 117, 123.

In *Satyarth Prakash*, when it is pointed out that the prohibition on widow remarriage will lead the widowed person to become "wicked", Dayanad Saraswati responds phlegmatically: "If the widows and widowers desire to practice *brahmacharya*, no such evil consequences will accrue." In complete contrast to this abbreviated one-line discussion of the celibate widowed person, the next ten pages are devoted to explaining the terms under which the controversial practice of *niyog* may be sanctioned. *Niyog* explicitly acknowledged the widowed person's "desire" for offspring as well as their "natural appetites" and "passions." It permitted a "sexual congress" between a widowed man and a widowed woman. The consequences of such an arrangement – offspring and inheritance – are then clinically discussed.[51] As can be expected, *niyog* was seen as scandalous in the Punjab press and provoked the detractors of the Arya Samaj to portray the reformist movement as "lax in morality."[52]

The general tenor of articles in *Panchal Pandita* leans away from the reformist agenda of widow remarriage. In 1911, Suvira, a student at the KMV, reports on the Khukhrain community's decision to permit widows to remarry. While she acknowledges the decision as a progressive one, she asks if it may not have been better for the community to initiate a relief fund to educate widows.[53]

Schooling, celibacy and self-culture

A crucial clause in the KMV's criteria for permitting the widow pupil to receive a stipendiary allowance through the *Bhagvati Vidhva Sahayak Bhandar* is the widow's good character (*sadachar*). She must also have received the recommendation of two gentlemen (*bhadrapurush*), preferably members of an Arya Samaj chapter, who provide her with a character certificate and announce their guardianship of the widow. The widow pupil will be expected to reside in the student residence. Permission to reside outside will be granted only once the management committee are assured that the living arrangement will not jeopardise her studies and only if they are certain that they can maintain a "full watch" (*purnadrishti*) on her. The KMV also reserved the right to suspend the payment of the stipend at any stage. If she is found to have lied in the application, or not applied herself sufficiently to her studies, oris seen to exhibit any immoral traits (*durachar*), her allowance could be rescinded.[54] The terms

[51] Saraswati, *Light of Truth*, 118-129.
[52] Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities*, 88-90. See also Kishwar, "The Daughters of *Aryavarta*," 301.
[53] Suvira, '*StriJagat*,' *Panchal Pandita* 14, no. 8 (1911): 17.
[54] *Sampadak*, '*Bhagvati Vidhva Sahayak Bhandarke Niyam*,' *Panchal Pandita* 4, no.1, (1900): 7-9.

of the *Bhagvati Vidhva Sahayak Bhandar* to some extent respond to the contemporary perception of Hindu widows as either destitute or promiscuous.[55]While framed within an institutional pragmatism to 'protect' the widow, the disciplinary emphasis legitimizes patriarchal supervision, while also suggesting an anxiety over the unattached widow. The exacting requirements were a function of the extreme suspicion young widows aroused in contemporary society. It has been suggested that in "most" reformist literature the word 'prostitute' was "unproblematically" used to refer to widows.[56]

Additionally, it must be remembered, colonial administrators employ fairly disparaging terms in their assessment of women teachers in education records. We are familiar with Krishna Kumar's perceptive analysis of the disenfranchised male teacher, now reduced to a glorified clerk in the education department.[57] A worse fate awaited women teachers. One report states that women teachers are in general "decrepit and incompetent."[58] Some of the disregard is likely also a consequence of the 'less respectable' class and caste identity of the women who signed up for teaching.[59] Therefore, the qualifier "respectable" in this analysis cuts both ways – it is a grim indicator of the calumny and ostracization experienced by women who, through encouragement or compulsion, signed up to become teachers in this period of education history. While the women seek employment opportunities to transcend their less-than-respectable circumstances, colonial administrators often view them with derision, if not open contempt.

The pages of *Panchal Pandita* are a performance in respectability for the young widow, and the 'decrepit' and 'incompetent' woman teacher, through a narration of ritualized upper caste practices. On more than one occasion the periodical visibly and publicly celebrates the widow pupil's ritual initiation into a life of studentship through an investiture ceremony, the *yajnopavit*. This ceremony symbolically transforms the space of the school into a sacred altar, invests the widow pupil with a brahminical personhood and sanctifies her period of study at the KMV. The pages of *Panchal Pandita* perform this transformation to an audience far bigger than the school. The periodical's extensive reportage of generations of pupil-teachers does not always clarify the caste and class identity of its students. Instead, the overwhelming impression the periodical communicates is that a non-elite group was staking a claim to being perceived

[55] See also Pran Nevile, *Lahore: A Sentimental Journey*, (Penguin, 2006), 63-65.
[56] Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities,* 91-92. Nair, Women and Colonial Law, 52, 61. See also Sarkar, 'Wicked Widows,' 104, 107.
[57] Krishna Kumar, *Political Agenda of Education: A Study of Colonialist and Nationalist Ideas*, (Sage, 1991), 73-94.
[58] Connolly, *Public Instruction in Punjab for 1901-1902*, 31.
[59] With fewer restrictions on their movement, they were the likeliest students at the schools established by the colonial government and thus also the first generation of teachers in the region. See Kishwar, 'The Daughters of *Aryavarta*,', 312.

as at least 'equal,' if not 'elite.' The adoption of similar investiture ceremonies in instances of caste mobility has been noted.[60] The periodical rarely mentions the student's caste name; instead, place names become the preferred identity marker. The occlusion of caste identity was a conscious decision by the editors.[61]Over the years the periodical begins to employ the words widow (*vidhva*) and orphan (*anatha*) sharply suffixed to student names, in order to generate an implied context with which to interpret the student's achievements. In April 1912, we are informed, that Savitri Devi leads sixteen widows through an investiture ceremony. In this description the names of the widows (Vidyavati) and their hometowns (Jhang) can be seen to be 'contained' within a symbology of upper caste ritual practices.[62]

Additionally, the investiture ceremony is curated within the domain of 'education', enacted publicly as self-culture, and crucially bound with actions of collective outreach among other vulnerable groups. *Panchal Pandita* sternly denounces assumptions over the status of women as '*shudra*,' as a reason for denying them access to education. In some articles we notice that both women and the 'lower castes' are understood as "*patit*," (lit. fallen, outcast). Additionally, the KMV's widow students are being urged to take on larger social responsibilities through outreach to 'fallen' women.[63] An editorial statement in the December 1910 issue of the periodical claims that the KMV has elevated girls from a '*shudra*' status to '*brahmanatva*.'[64] Here the word *brahmanatva* signals 'virtue', and derives from Dayanand Saraswati's insistence that the word '*brahman*' relates to the attainment of knowledge and the distilling of character. It involves an association with those similarly "good and learned," and "devotion to public good."[65]

In some measure, the investiture ceremony of students at the KMV aligns with the emancipatory caste rhetoric introduced by the Arya Samaj in Punjab. As a corollary, we know of non-Brahmin members of the Arya Samaj, perceived as 'lower caste' in colonial Punjab, who became very successful "controversialists", engaging in religious disputations with priests.[66]The periodical's publication of articles by Santram BA, founder of the Jat Pat Torak

[60] C. S. Adcock, *The Limits of Tolerance: Indian Secularism and the Politics of Religious Freedom*, (Oxford University Press, 2014), 46.
[61] Satyadev Vidyalankar, *Lala Devraj*, (Sarasvati Sadan, 1935), 53.
[62] *Sampadak*, '*Kanya Mahavidyalaya Samachar*,' *Panchal Pandita* 15, no. 6, (1912), 27.
[63] Hemant Kumari Chaudharani, '*PatitJatika Uddharashram*,' *Panchal Pandita* 15, no. 1, (1911): 8-13.
[64] *Sampadak*, '*Kanya Mahavidyalaya Samachar*,' *Panchal Pandita* 14, no. 2, (1910): 25.
[65] Saraswati, *Light of Truth*, 84-85.
[66] Adcock, *The Limits of Tolerance:* 45-47.

Mandal, suggest that the occlusion of caste identity in *Panchal Pandita* is, in some measure, aligned with the stirrings of an anticaste mobilization.[67]

At the same time, Jalandhar was also a crucible for the assertion of the Ad Dharm movement, which drew several affiliates from the Arya Samaj. We learn of anticaste reformers, like Mangoo Ram, who gravitated first to the Arya Samaj, before they relocated more decisively to the Ad Dharm movement. The new affiliation afforded them a distance from which they became deeply suspicious of the Arya Samaj'santicaste rhetoric, despite carrying forward many of the Arya Samaj's organizational apparatuses to the Ad Dharm movement.[68]

Some qualifications are therefore necessary. Historians have alerted us to the Arya Samaj's "ambivalence" in matters of caste, citing in particular their attempts to coopt the energies of anticaste mobilization in order to swell the number of Hindus, at a time when the reduction in Hindu numbers was being perceived as perilous and was interpreted in relation to accounts of conversion to Islam and Christianity.[69] Understood from this perspective, the investiture ceremony of the widow students is also an attempt at disallowing widows from stepping across community lines.[70] The ritualized caste symbology in *Panchal Pandita*, therefore, must necessarily be read in all its ambivalence, as a layered meaning-making exercise – while lending respectability to a vulnerable group it is also an endorsement of upper caste practices.

The KMV's most sustained response to elevate the social and cultural status of the young widow pupil-teacher is by symbolically framing her years of learning and teaching with a vow of celibacy. The lived practice of celibacy comprises a vital seam of ritual-politics running through the pages of *Panchal Pandita*. The conjunct 'ritual-politics,' employed in recent scholarship, highlights how the Arya Samaj did not represent *brahmacharya* in the language of religion. Instead, Arya Samaj ideologues invoke the practice to suggest the "cultivation of character." It enables the reinterpretation of secular ideals – female education and the rehabilitation of widows – in a distinctly non-secular idiom. In the case of the Arya Samaj this particular ritual practice is enjoined upon "persons customarily deemed unsuited to it."[71]As suggested before with the investiture ceremony, the vow of celibacy affords the widow

[67] See Charu Gupta, *Hindi Hindu, Histories: Caste, Ayurveda, Travel and Communism in Early Twentieth Century India*, (Permanent Black, 2025), 40-78.
[68] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Ad Dharm Challenge to Caste*, 1982 (Navayana, 2009), 35, 42-43, 49, 57, 64-71.
[69] Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities*, 38-41.
[70] Charu Gupta, 'A Vernacular Archive of Sex and Sexuality: Personal Annotations,' in *Language Ideologies and the Vernacular in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia*, eds. Nishat Zaidi and Hans Harder, (Routledge, 2024): 102-104.
[71] Adcock, *Limits of Tolerance*, 45-55.

students at the KMV an alternative measure of respectability. And yet, *Panchal Pandita*'s promotion of celibacy among its widow students may call to mind the deeply disturbing imposition of ascetic widowhood among the upper castes across regions. As early as 1885, Rakhmabai, in a series of letters to the *Times of India* called out Brahminical patriarchy's double standards as they encouraged young widows to abstain from "the vanities of this world," while they were free to swiftly marry again upon losing a wife.[72]

The periodical employs three distinctive discursive registers, addressing different readers, in its exploration of widowhood: reportage, injunction and entreaty. The reportage on Census statistics, widows' homes in the country and widow students at the KMV draws focus towards reformist projects of amelioration. The 'injunction' mode is noticeable in the hectoring address to widow students, where the widow's duty is laid before her: she is encouraged to commit herself to her studies, eschew all sensory pleasure and lead a life devoted to service. In addition to this, the periodical also addresses potential donors and patrons, urging them to donate money to the school.

In this context it becomes important to note the few instances when *Panchal Pandita* acknowledges, however faintly, the widow's own voice. The July 1901 issue of *Panchal Pandita* published a prayer in the voice of a young widow, probably composed by one of the male editors. Although the editors are compelled to acknowledge the widow's own voice, they control what she can say. In the prayer, the widow views her present life as a punishment for past sins and believes that desires bring "pain." She prays for strength to observe a vow of unbroken celibacy (*akhandit brahmacharyavrat*). She views herself as a mother to the "world's children" and intends to serve the entire world. This fleeting example exemplifies the many paradoxes at play in the typology of ascetic widowhood: the widow's "deprivations" are seen as "voluntary," while being at the same time an instance of an "authoritative order:"[73]

> O Great God! I see your love even in your harshest punishment. Grant me strength to remain celibate and fulfill my life purpose. Only with your grace will I be able to commit to a vow of unbroken celibacy. Allow me to believe that all the world's children are my children. Let the whole world consider me its mother.
> With complete control over my sensory desires, let me be inspired to gain an education, let me remain my entire life an ambassador of virtue . . . Desires bring pain, never a sense of fulfilment. . . Let me always remain determined to help the entire world and propagate good deeds. O Great God, allow me to fulfill this vow.[74]

[72] Chakravarty, *Rewriting History*, 259.
[73] Sarkar, 'Wicked Widows,' 100.
[74] Anon. '*Vidhvaki Prarthna*,' *Panchal Pandita* 4, no. 9, (1901): 4.

In this prayer the vow of unbroken celibacy is simultaneous with a period of studentship ("gain an education"), self-culture ("ambassador of virtue") and the performance of "good deeds". The prayer embraces many different elements of the doctrinal principles on *brahmacharya* found in the writings of Arya Samaj ideologues. The complex layering of discursive elements in this prayer reveals that the editors of *Panchal Pandita* were crafting a new paradigm for the child widow, through an amalgamation of ideas around the practice of *brahmacharya*. Some of the elements of this paradigm reinforce the opinions of Swami Dayanand, others are a strategic reinterpretation of his doctrines, if not an expedient over-reading. This allows the founders of the KMV to push through on their rehabilitation efforts for widow students.

Dayanand Saraswati's *Satyarth Prakash* does not address itself to the state of the child widow. Its injunctions on *brahmacharya* are contained in chapters three (on education), four (the married life) and five (the life of the renunciate). It is only in the fourth chapter that Dayanand Saraswati discusses the three different scenarios in relation to widows – widow remarriage, *brahamacharya* and *niyog*. *Panchal Pandita*'s editors are particularly invested in the lived practice of *brahmacharya*. However, since the focus is on the schooling of the child widow, the editors begin borrowing broader strains from the third chapter, which discusses the period of studentship of the boy and girl. Ironically, the widow's prayer bears closest resemblance to the "highest kind" of *brahmacharya* described in relation to men who observe it until the age of 48, enabling the initiate to acquire, "perfect knowledge, perfect physical strength, perfect wisdom, perfect development of good qualities, nature and characteristics," so that the *brahmachari* may "shine like the sun, enlightening all. . ." *Brahmacharya*, therefore, is a broad range of attributes, it includes a commitment to celibacy, but is not defined solely in relation to that practice. It extends to other practices of the self and is crucially tied to a broader, purposeful engagement with the world, "enlightening all."

Brahmacharya, traditionally understood as a stage of life in which to acquire knowledge and perfect character, is for the widows at KMV extended to an "unbroken vow," observed for life. It is aligned strongly with the lived practices of the ascetic, whose social role is described most fully in chapter five (*Vanaprastha* and *Sanyasa*) of *Satyarth Prakash*. This interpolation, of the public good performed by the renunciate *sanyasi*, permits the editors of *Panchal Pandita* to suggest that the educated and virtuous widow pupil, committed to *brahmacharya* for life, engages in public deeds, like teaching, to serve humanity at large. Thus, the widow's prayer invokes the doctrinal principles laid out in *Satyarth Prakash,* but disturbs the texture and organization of their original emphasis. Therefore, in *Panchal Pandita* the word *brahmacharya* seems quite capacious and begins to acquire multiple resonances. It is

understood as a broad terrain of practices that include, but are not limited to, celibacy. Given its conceptual elasticity, the KMV is able to feminise the practices of the "highest kind" of self-culture, doctrinally prescribed to Arya Samaj men.

The principal context for the practice of *brahmacharya* at the KMV is an intentional period of studentship. The cue towards "perfect knowledge" is taken seriously by the KMV's founder Lala Devraj who believed that women should receive an advanced education, extending beyond mere literacy and letter-writing skills. The syllabus included religious education, but was, at the same time, quite broad ranging. From its earliest issues, the pages of *Panchal Pandita* carry long lists of books, stretching to usually thirty or more titles, several of which are composed by Lala Devraj. Among these are primers, song books, collections of short tales, plays, novellas, as well as books on religious instruction. These textbooks went into multiple editions over the years and were prescribed in schools with no affiliation to the Arya Samaj.[75]

The first-person voice of the widow's prayer is significant because, as mentioned previously, it is very rarely encountered in *Panchal Pandita* and indicates a commitment to self-practices that are defined by the KMV *for* its students. While it is undeniably a mechanism for generating consent the prayer also allows us to acknowledge the widow's attempt to speak for *herself*. Alongside a commitment to "gain an education" the widow's prayer is indicative of a regimen of self-culture that is defined principally in terms of self-restraint and self-knowledge. She wishes to practice "control over [her] sensory desires," to become "an ambassador of virtue." She believes that "desires bring pain, never a sense of fulfilment." The prayer is a bid to allow her to take fuller possession of herself, to realise a deeply personal sense of the right path: "Let the right path (*dharma*) be my wealth."

It is significant that the widow looks within herself for the 'right path,' she is not dependent on any intermediary, like a priest, seer or a mentor. The inward-looking emphasis in the widow's prayer is indicative of a disenchantment with the Hindu orthodoxy. In December 1901, the year that saw the publication of the widow's prayer, *Panchal Pandita* published another article titled "*Vaidhavya Dharm*." This article reiterates some of the details from the prayer. The writer sternly warns her "widow sisters," against falling prey to false ascetics (*pakhandisadhuon*) and advises them to pursue a path of the true religion (*saccadharm*).[76]The reference to a 'true religion' is an invitation to bring into this discussion the writings of the first

[75] Vidyalankar, *Lala Devraj*, 48; *Panchal Pandita* 4, no. 1, (1900): 23; Advertisement, '*Putri Pathshala Bairobal*,' *Panchal Pandita* 9, no. 19, (1906): inside cover.
[76] Anon, '*Vaidhavya Dharma*,' *Panchal Pandita* 5, no. 2, (1901): 6-7.

generation of Arya Samaj ideologues whose disenchantment with Hindu orthodoxy is well-known. For instance, we know that Lala Munshi Ram, a close associate of Lala Devraj and founder of the Gurukul Kangri in 1902, explored a turn to atheism in his autobiography, *Kalyan Marg ka Pathik*(1924). He frequently cites incidents involving lascivious and predatory men of religion. Munshi Ram describes his transition from being an atheist to an Arya Samajist, as an instance of "finding and creating a '*brahmanatva*' (Brahminhood) within." Mohinder Singh's analysis of Munshi Ram's autobiography brings focus to its searching quality, noting a "commitment to live a self-questioning or examined life," and a "rigorous inculcation of the virtues of transparency and sincerity." Further, Lala Munshi Ram's autobiography signals the link between a regimen of self-culture and self-rule (*swaraj*). In Munshi Ram's words: "True *swaraj* is dominion over the self, self-conquest, through the control of concupiscence and the lower passions . . ."[77]

The foundational years of the KMV and its *Panchal Pandita* saw a dramatic increase in activity by Sanatam Dharm institutions, believed to have developed as a response of the Hindu orthodoxy to the Congress as well as the Arya Samaj.[78] Jalandhar witnessed many battles over religious doctrine between the Arya Samaj and the Sanatan Dharm Sabha. The KMV's leaning into the typology of the austere, ascetic widow, may seem to align it to some extent with ideologues of the Bharat Dharm Mahamandal. The ideal of the ascetic widow was asserted frequently in books, pamphlets and articles. These ideologues also rejected arguments for the remarriage of widows and promoted instead the ideal of an austere life.[79] And yet, as mentioned with reference to the article on *Vaidhavya Dharma*, the pages of *Panchal Pandita* evidenced a deep suspicion of the priesthood. The Arya Samaj, in this and other instances, was promoting what has been understood as an "internalization" of the priesthood that could be initiated through a regimen of self-culture. The turn inwards in the context of the Arya Samaj, towards rigorously instituted practices of self-discipline, is substantially indicative of a disenchantment with Hindu orthodoxy.

In late colonial India, particularly within educational discourse, both men and women were harnessing and reassembling the signs and vocabulary of an ascetic life in order to assert themselves culturally and professionally. In 1901, Rabindranath Tagore established a school

[77] Mohinder Singh, 'A Question of Life and Death': Conversion, Self and Identity in Swami Shraddhanand's Autobiography,' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* (2018): 7-14.
[78] Vidyalankar, *Lala Devraj*, 35-36; Pall, Sheena. 'Sanatan Dharm Institutions in Colonial Punjab,' in *Social Transformation in North-Western India during the Twentieth Century*, ed. Chetan Singh, (Manohar, 2010), 90, 94.
[79] Giridhar Sharma Chaturvedi's *Vidhvadharm* (1915) is cited as an example of the belief that the sufferings of widows were the consequence of a life of past sins. Grewal, 'Widows in North-Western India,' 382, endnote 86.

called *Brahmacharyashram* in Santiniketan in 1901. For Tagore the "the idea of *brahmacharya*" extended much beyond a vow to celibacy. The "spiritual objective" was to "prepare oneself . . . through self-control, faith, purity and dedication – for worldly duties and . . . for union with . . . the divine one." However, in the context of Santiniketan, this concept could not be implemented seamlessly. Many of the teachers lived with their families in the *ashram*. Therefore, Tagore refusing to "interpret *brahmacharya* as mere celibacy," allowed it to take on the connotation of simplicity, or a rejection of "the lure of wealth and luxuries." Tagore insisted on the need for the students to "practice austerity . . . [and] completely eliminate pride of wealth." Tagore's emphasis on *brahmacharya*can be seen as an "imaginative attempt to challenge Western hegemony through a rejection of Western imperialism."[80] His injunctions against "pride of wealth," are noticeable in many articles in *Panchal Pandita* demanding its student collective reject all signs of wealth, especially jewellery and fine clothes.[81]

The widow's prayer to "to help the entire world and propagate good deeds" suggests that the vow of celibacy, while encouraging a turn inwards, also attests to new collectivities. Alongside the widow's prayer, and the article on the widow's *dharma*, *Panchal Pandita* published numerous other articles promoting sensory restraint and *brahmacharya*.[82] These articles were directed to a mixed audience – unmarried students and teachers, married students and teachers, widow students and teachers. The clause about *brahmacharya* had different implications for this diverse group. For those unmarried, the experience of studying and teaching at the KMV immediately extended the period of *brahmacharya*. However, the pages of the periodical also cite instances of former students of the KMV, who even after they are married, return to the school, live in its austere *ashram* and fulfill their vow of serving the institution as teachers. In this manner, *brahmacharya* is rewritten in practice, providing a collective experience shared by widowed, unmarried and married students. *Panchal Pandita*'s pages suggest that while 'unbroken celibacy' has been known to be practiced by some women, most women can choose to practice celibacy up to different stages in life. The KMV was encouraging all its students to extend their period of studentship, and thus defer or interrupt their plans to marry. It is compelling to note that child widows at the KMV committed to a vow of celibacy alongside other students who were also called upon to do the same.

[80] Sukalyan Chandra, *A Poet's Ashram: Rabindranath Tagore's Experimental Community in Colonial India*, (Routledge, 2025), 55-57.
[81] Anon. '*Vidya aur Bhushan*,' *Panchal Pandita* 5, no. 6 (1902): 4-5; Shrimati Jind, '*Gahneka Jhagda*,' *Panchal Pandita* 14, no. 8, (1911): 22-23.
[82] See Anon. '*Brahmacharini Jap*,' *Panchal Pandita* 4, no. 1 (1901): 5.

Widow students who transition to becoming teachers at the KMV invariably teach without a salary. Their labour is rhetorically cast in terms of a vow to serve without a salary, *avaitanik sevavrat*. This practice draws its sanction from the terms of the widow relief fund discussed previously. Shrimati Savitri Devi, a former student and then headmistress, worked at the KMV her entire life without a salary. Very seldom do we encounter another widow student who matches Savitri Devi in every way. In one instance '*Vidhva* Yashodabai' is noted for her exceptional skills as a preacher.[83] Other less and differently skilled widows are also accommodated and supported by the KMV. For instance, Shrimati Lakshmi Devi is sent to learn pottery in Lucknow, while Bhagyavati learns sewing at Hafizabad.[84] Both Lakshmi Devi and Bhagyavati teach at the KMV without a salary. These widows also take on managerial responsibilities and travel with Lala Devraj to promote female education and solicit funds for the KMV.[85]

Although the experience of schooling, celibacy and self-culture was mostly shared by all students at the KMV, it was the widow student who had to take swift decisions to terminate her studies in order to earn a livelihood. Some were compelled to abandon their studies within a few years of schooling. The periodical informs us about Parmeshwari, who was sent by the Shrigovindpur Arya Samaj to study at the KMV and become a teacher. The editors complain that she could study only till level five after which she was summoned back to Shrigovindpur to teach at a girls' school that was in peril of dissolution.[86] Reporting on the appointments of Hiradevi and Shivdevias teachers at Battala, the periodical laments their truncated learning experience at the KMV.[87]In similar manner, Sarasvati Devi, a student of class five, learns of her brother's death and rushes back to Mirzapur to support her family by teaching at a local school.[88]It is therefore the widows whose student lives were most likely to be disrupted. For the widow students a simultaneous commitment to schooling, celibacy and self-culture was often unsustainable.

Interestingly, the rhetoric employed in the pages of *Panchal Pandita* bears a striking resemblance to the typology of the 'virgin mother' we notice more broadly. Explaining the transition unfolding in mid-nineteenth century Britain, Eileen Yeo states: ". . . to get around the understanding of a public woman as a prostitute and also to combat accusations of selfish

[83] *Sampadak*, '*Kanya Mahavidyalya Samachar*,' *Panchal Pandita* 14, no. 12, (1911): 25.
[84] *Sampadak*, '*Kanya Mahavidyalya Samachar*,' *Panchal Pandita* 13, no. 3, (1910): 23.
[85] *Sampadak*, '*Kanya Mahavidyalya Samachar*,'*Panchal Pandita* 14, no. 2, (1910): 22.
[86] *Sampadak*, *'Kanya Mahavidyalaya Samachar*,' *Panchal Pandita* 9, no. 1, (1905): 25. See also *Sampadak*, "*Kanya Mahavidyalya Samachar*," *Panchal Pandita* 11, no. 5 (1908): 26.
[87] *Sampadak*, '*Kanya Mahavidyalya Samachar*,' *Panchal Pandita* 13, no. 12, (1910): 27.
[88] *Sampadak*, '*Kanya Mahavidyalya Samachar*,' *Panchal Pandita* 15, no. 1, (1911): 26.

shrinking of feminine duty, publicly active single women employ chastity and sacrifice as bywords in their vocabulary."[89] This emphasis on asceticism had consequences, at an individual level, but also in a wider sense. In assuming the identity of the ascetic teacher KMV women are also being encouraged to reinforce social distance through their harsh critique of those who rejected conformity. As Yeo suggests, "this version of sisterhood reproduced inequality rather than transcending it." Additionally, the doctrine of sacrifice leaves behind a legacy of low pay for women in similar "caring professions."[90] Therefore, while acknowledging the idea of a collective practice of *brahmacharya*, we cannot ignore the hectoring tone of several articles in *Panchal Pandita* that seem sternly critical of women who choose differently. On some occasions, the school and its periodical reinforce social distance through their harsh critique of those who rejected conformity. Lala Devraj's disappointment with widows who resisted the austere environments of the student *ashram* have been noted in more than one instance.[91] We can therefore suggest that this version of the collective at times reproduced inequality, rather than resolving it.[92] Paradoxically, therefore, while the pages of *Panchal Pandita* herald a period of advanced learning, professionalism and respectability in a previously inaccessible public role of the teacher for the child widow, it also entailed real limitations.

Scholars who have alerted us to the deeply self-reflexive and inward-looking paradigms of self-culture noticeable in the writings of the first generation of Arya Samaj ideologues, are also cognizant of the fact that this group was not "politically benign."[93] The most sustained critique of an Arya Samaj educational institution can be found in the instance of the Gurukul Kangri. Here Lala Munshi Ram institutionalized *brahmacharya* for young men. It has been argued that the practice of celibacy at the Gurukul Kangri, while drawing upon the pedagogical tenets of Swami Dayanand Saraswati, was actually also responsive to colonial medicine's insights regarding 'race theory', or eugenics. It was widely believed that celibacy ensured longevity and prevented premature deaths, thus addressing itself to anxieties over the falling population of young Hindu men, as well as the growing percentage of Hindu widows.[94]

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[89] Eileen Janes Yeo, 'Virgin Mothers: Single Women Negotiate the Doctrine of Motherhood in Victorian and Edwardian Britain,' in *Women on their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single*, eds. Rudolph M. Bell and Virginia Yans, (Rutgers, 2010), 52.
[90] Yeo, 'Virgin Mothers,' 52-53.
[91] *Sampadak*, '*Sampadakiya Prastav*,' *Panchal Pandita* 14, no. 4, (1911): 9.
[92] Yeo, 'Virgin Mothers,' 53.
[93] Adcock, *Limits of Tolerance*, 71.
[94] Harald Fischer-Tine, 'From *Brahmacharya* to 'Conscious Race Culture': Victorian Discourse of 'Science' and Hindu Traditions in Early Indian Nationalism', in Crispin Bates Ed. *Beyond Representation: Colonial and Postcolonial Constructions of Indian Identity*, (OUP, 2006) 249.

Panchal Pandita published several articles that bear the imprint of some of the same ideas – child marriages lead to infirm offspring, the premature deaths of young men and the escalating numbers of widows.[95] The KMV was therefore promoting *brahmacharya* among its girl students in a way that seems to complement the imperative for a similar practice at Gurukul Kangri. A longer period of celibacy would allow women to enter married life later than customarily practiced, give birth to healthier children, and also dramatically reduce the chances of early widowhood.

A more textured understanding of *ashram* life, and the collective practice of celibacy, is available in Mahatma Gandhi's, *Ashram Observances in Action* (1932). Here he claims to have begun his experiments with celibacy in the year 1900, although it is practiced by the collective at Tolstoy Farm only from around 1906. He also clarifies that *brahmacharya* cannot be reduced to "mere control of animal passion," but instead an attempt to "control not one but all the organs of sense."[96] Additionally, he repeatedly draws attention to a failed practice, personally, and as noticed among his fellow residents at the *ashram*. Any assumption that there will be complete and unbroken success in the practice of *brahmacharya*, Gandhi argues, is an arrogant assumption of "omniscience": "Some of us have fallen, some have risen after sustaining a fall. The possibility of stumbling is implicit in all such experimentation. Where there is cent per cent success, it is not an experiment but a characteristic of omniscience."[97]

Gandhi's caution regarding an assumption of 'omniscience' and a faultless practice of celibacy is timely, and aligns with anecdotal accounts of the widows at the KMV. The emphasis on ascetic respectability had consequences at an individual level that were not always fully articulated. In a periodical which rarely carried any first-person accounts by widows, the widow's prayer, cited above, creates some space for the editors to suggest the widow's vulnerability: "grant me strength," she says, "only with your grace," she believes, "let me remain determined," she hopes. The performance of the self-reflexive mode in this fictionalized prayer suggests both the willingness to commit to the kind of self-culture promoted at the KMV, while also acknowledging the challenges it posed. Durgeshwari, a former student of the KMV who had enrolled at the school alongside her widowed sister in 1910, was warned off a commitment to lifelong celibacy by Shrimati Savitri, the school's austere widowed headmistress. As a result, Durgeshwari chose to get married, but remained committed to a life

[95] Ratnasharma, '*Santan Kyun Nirbal Hui*,' *Panchal Pandita* 9, no. 9, (1906): 8-10.
[96] M. K. Gandhi, *Ashram Observances in Action*, 1932, tr. Valji Govindji Desai, (Navjivan Publishing House, 1955), 48-53.
[97] Gandhi, *Ashram Observances in Action*, 53.

in social service.[98] Savitri Devi's hardnosed advice to Durgeshwari is substantially different from the determined tone of her articles on self-restraint and celibacy published in *Panchal Pandita*.[99] This brings us back to the observation made previously – widowed students were compelled by circumstances to commit to lifelong celibacy, much beyond their years of schooling, while the KMV's other students, like Durgeshwari, were free to exercise an element of choice.

Conclusion

To return to the question we began with: Why did Sushila Devi bequeath the signs of an auspicious and well-endowed married life to an educational institution? Her gesture signals an embrace of austerity, for the benefit of a life of learning and self-sufficiency that the KMV promoted among its widow students. And yet, we are left with the fact of her silence. *Panchal Pandita*, briefly and tangentially, allows her voice to be heard, although shrouded behind the signs of charity.

This analysis has compelled us to revisit education history from the perspective of the widow student at the KMV. This was an institution that may not have originated the opportunistic and astute assessment made by colonial administrators to employ widows in teaching institutions, but it certainly gave the matter very serious thought in the pages of *Panchal Pandita*. The editors repurposed Swami Dayanand Saraswati's injunctions regarding the celibate life to allow the widow student a period of uninterrupted study at the school. Her tenure at the school is marked by the lived practice of *brahmacharya* which signals a protracted period of self-culture that far exceeds the conventional and limited understanding of the practice. Most emphatically, the invocation of *brahmacharya* transforms the widow's transition into the publicness of a teaching life as an act of service and sacrifice, that may or may not receive renumeration. Further, the practice of celibacy, and allied ritualized practices at the KMV, when examined within the turbulent cross-currents of various social reform initiatives (Arya Samaj, Sanatan Dharma Sabha and Ad Dharm) allows us to assess the typology of the 'respectable widow' in all its iterations.

Anecdotal accounts of widow students at the KMV give us some estimate of their vulnerabilities. Their commitment to a vow of unbroken celibacy, in the midst of unmarried and married students, nurtures a sense of community, but also imperils nonconformity.

[98] Shadi Ram Joshi, *Uttar Pashchimi Bharat Men Stri Shakti Jagaranka Murt Rup: Kanya Mahavidyalaya Jalandhar*, (Patent Printing Press, nd), 212-215.
[99] Savitri, '*Indriadaman*,' *Panchal Pandita* 4, no. 12,(1901): 13-21.

Additionally, it is often the widows who are compelled to observe celibacy for longer than other students, they also are more likely to hastily end their period of studentship when an employment opportunity arises. The circumstance of a collective, that may be divided from within, provokes us to look further at the *ashram* lives of intellectuals like Munshi Ram, Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. In these varied instances, *brahmacharya* is invoked to signal, variously, race identity, anticolonial resistance, as well as moral authority.

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