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Socio-Cultural Problems of Migrant Widows in India: Special Reference to Vrindavan City

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Abstract:

Widowhood is a curse to a woman and from ages she has been exploited, humiliated and deprived from decency in living. It is a typical life situation where the widowhood brought it with the stigma of impurity for the unfortunate woman, created feelings of moral aversion and distrust towards her, compelling her to lead a life of stern asceticism, wearing only white sarees and spending most of her time to sing bhajans. The ultimate humiliation comes when she is thrown out of the family and packed off to Vrindavan. This paper is based on the primary data, collected through Interview schedule and observation. In this paper, we will study how Widowhood brings about severe social, economic and cultural problems in the life of the migrated widows. Where a widow is not burnt alive, but she faces “living death” with major restrictions in her life.

Key words: Widows, Migration, Problems.

Introduction

Widows: Widowhood is a universal phenomenon. It is special case of mortality where the male partner dies earlier than the women partner. The rate of widowhood differs from country to country, even within the country differ from region to region and place to place.

The proposed study is focused on widows of India. The meaning of widow is a woman who lost her husband and not married again, the life of widows is very critical in condition they face a variety of societal taboos every day and practice austerity and self-denial. The traditional belief here is that once husband dies, they must denounce worldly pleasures. They should wear plain white saris as a sign of mourning for their husbands

as long as they live and must abide by severe diet restrictions, shave their heads, not wearing blouse under one's sari and their presence at rituals, ceremonies and celebrations is considered inauspicious.

Widowhood in India has been characterized by certain distinct and deplorable social norms. For instance, in earlier times a widow was burnt alive on her husband's funeral pyre in a custom known as "sati" but in Rajasthan, cases where a widow was not burnt alive, she faced a "living death"- her head was tonsured, she lived outside the main house or in a dark room within the house, slept on a thin mat on the floor, cooked her own food before sunrise, was not allowed to adorn herself, wear colorful clothes or ornaments and had to spend her life in devotion to God, as a penance for her "sins" which had led to her husband's death. Thus, for all practical purposes she became a non-entity, for her entire "entity" was based on the existence of her husband.

Apart from these traditional practices related to widowhood, loss of husband has a social, cultural, economic, physical as well as psychological impact on a widow. A widow is often vulnerable to physical, sexual and mental abuse. She is socially marginalized and culturally ostracized in societies where life revolves around the male. The loss of her husband results in her withdrawal from reproduction and sexuality and debarment from the functioning social unit of the family. She is expected to lead a life of austerity, social segregation and devotion. She is excluded from all auspicious ceremonies for even her shadow is considered to be a bad omen. For the rest of her life she is supposed to remain in mourning. The ultimate humiliation comes when she is thrown out of the family and packed off to Vrindavan or Varanasi to fend for herself. The two holy places are packed with such widows, who survive by begging for scraps of food and singing bhajans for "pennies" in the local temples S.K.Ghosh (1989) in the volume titled "Indian Women through the Ages" while analyzing the status of women in India also focuses on widows. The author stresses on the restrictions imposed on widows regarding food, ornaments, behavior and holds that the purpose of these restrictions is to control her sexuality by reducing her sexual attraction. The study tellingly illustrates why widows are sent to Vrindavan and their plight in the ashrams there.

The cities of Vrindavan and Varanasi – referred to as the "widow cities" of India – welcome thousands of widows every year; those who have no other place left to go. These cities are home to a large number of dingy, suffocated, guest houses and "ashrams" where impoverished and abandoned widows spend the remainder of their lives. According to Baidyanath Saraswati (1985) in his article "The Kashivasi Widows" Explains that Widowhood not only leads to social, cultural, psychological and economic deprivation but also affects the relationship of widow with the family. Both the family and the widow may be unable to adjust to the death of the male head of the household and this is the cause of many widows moving to Kashi or Vrindavan.

Migration

The word 'migration' derives from the Latin verb 'Migrare', "Meaning to move one place to another" literally, the term 'Migration' means settlement or shifting of an individual or group of individuals from one culture area or physical space to another, more or less permanently. The term has been defined in the new Webster's dictionary as the actor instance of moving from one country, or region or place to settle in another and for searching for work and employment. So, different Scholars have understood the term migration in different ways.

Paterson (1958) defines migration as movement motivated by the individual willingness to risk the unknown of a new home and breaking from a familiar social universe for the state of adventures, achievement of ideals or to escape a social system from which he has become alienated.

Chauhan (1996) defines migration as change of residence from one geographical area to another for a certain specified period of time (one year or more).

Lee (1996) migration broadly as a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence, No destination is placed upon distance of the move or upon the voluntary and involuntary nature of act and no distinction is made between external and internal migration.

International Labour Office (I.L.O.) the statistics of temporary migration should cover that person who passes from country to another country or one place to another place more than a month not more than a year and for permanent migration is more than a year.

Types of Migration:

There are mainly two types of migration:

Internal Migration: Internal migration means within the country. In this type of migration we can include the following types:

Various types of migration:

S.No	Intra District Migration	Inter district Migration	Inter state Migration	Inter national Migration
1	Rural to Urban	Rural to Urban	Rural to Urban	Rural to Urban
2	Urban to Rural	Urban to Rural	Urban to Rural	Urban to Rural
3	Rural to Rural	Rural to Rural	Rural to Rural	Rural to Rural
4	Urban to Urban	Urban to Rural	Urban to Urban	Urban to Urban

Migration of population within the boundary of a district is defined as intra-district migration but when the movement is outside the district but within the state is known as inter district migration, when the movement beyond the state and Union Territory (UT) but within the country is known as inter-state migration.

International Migration: International migration means movement from one country to another country.

Causes of Migration:

According to Lee's (1966): there is one theory which has two factors one is pull and other one is push factor, the pull factor is that which factor attracted the people to go to destination place, second one is push factor that is which factor forced you to leave your native place.

These are the two factors are explained about the migration, one is push factor and the other one is pull factors

Push factors	Pull Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not enough jobs • Few opportunities • Primitive condition • Desertification • Famine or drought • Political fear or persecution • Poor medical care • Loss of wealth • Natural disasters • Death threats • Slavery • Pollution • Poor housing • Landlord / tenant issues • Bullying • Discrimination • Poor chances of marrying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job opportunities • Better living condition • Political and religious freedom • Security • industry • Enjoyment • Education • Better chances of marrying

According to above theory of push and pull factors, widows are migrated from their Native states to Vrindavan, the major push factors are Discrimination, Land and property issue, Death Threats and no employment opportunities. The major pull factors are better living condition, Employment opportunities and some sort of security for survival

Migrant Widows in Vrindavan from different states:

STATES	TOTAL
WEST BENGAL	54 %
ORISSA	16 %
MADYA PRADESH	08 %
UTTAR PRADESH	13 %
OTHER STATES	09 %
TOTAL	100 %

The above table shows that, widows are migrating from all over the country (from different states) mostly majority of the widows are migrated from west Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and other states with respective percentage 54, 16, 08, 13 and 09. The major push factors for widows migration is poverty, ill treatment and Discrimination. The pull factors are Religion and Living chances on the basis of begging and charity by donors.

Reasons for Widows Migration:

Financial (wealth of the Husband):

Savings left by Deceased Husband	Govt Ashrams	Private	Street	Total
Yes	4	3	7	16
No	23	25	29	83
Total				100

The above table shows that deceased husbands wealth: 83 percent of the widows deceased husbands didn't have any property on their names by that they fall into severe poverty where they cannot afford single plate meal per day. The widows did not get any wealth in the name of husbands as an inheritance. It shows that didn't get property from their deceased husbands. Only 16 percent of the widows of the deceased husbands are having property in their names, The above table shows very clearly the majority of the widows are going through financial crisis because they lost the bread winner and there is no property for them to survive after the death of the husband.

Ill-treatment by the family towards migrant widows:

Treatment by	Total
In laws	48
Children	17
Daughter law	21
Parental	3
Others	6
No one	2
Total	100

Widows are going through ill-treatment by their own family members, when women turned as a widow then it starts ill-treatment with in the family. The above data shows how the widows went through sufferings by their own family. 48 percent of the widows by their in-laws, 17 percent by children, 21 percent by the daughter in-laws, 3 percent by parents and 6 percent from others are ill-treated. According to Srinivas and Vijayalaxmi (2001) Son is the most frequent abuser for elderly men and women. Most of the elderly women report that their daughters in law are the most abusive family members. The abusers are from a variety of occupations and include house wives and the unemployed.

Religion:

Religion plays a vital role in the life of widows. They land at the temples of Vrindavan for their survival and livelihood. They practice religion on the basis of great faith where they feel they get the survival by the help of GOD, they go to temple every day and worship God by that they get money for survival. They go to Bhajan Ashrams to Bhajan According to **Girija Vyas (2010)** Bhagwan Bhajan Ashram has 7 branches at Vrindavan, namely, Gopinath Bazar, Murarka Dharamshala Patharpura, Patharpura Naya Bhawan, Patharpura Narsingh Bhawan, Patharpura Chotibadi, Ath Khamba and Fogla Ashram. The Balaji Bhajan Ashram has only one branch at Ramanreti. This bhajan ashram is apparently run by the Action Shoe Company owners. The bhajan ashram has a hierarchy that appears as follows

Supervisor of Bhajan Ashram (keeps account of the number of women who come in each shift, resolves disputes and ensures that the women get their money, receives a monthly salary of Rs70)

- Token Manager (gives Rs3 token to women when they come in and gets a salary of Rs10 per month)
- Dholak Mai (lady who plays the dholak and gets Rs15 per month)
- Pravachan Mai (lady who reads the holy book and gets Rs9)
- Jhanj Mai (plays the jhanj and gets Rs5 per month)
- Bhajan Singers (remaining women who receive Rs3 per shift)

Problems of Migrated Widows

1. Sociological problems
2. Cultural Problems
3. Psychological Problems
4. Economic problems

Sociological problems: Widowhood is a curse to women and from ages she has been exploited, humiliated and deprived from decency in living, widowhood brought with it the stigma of impurity for the unfortunate women, a widow is expected to cut her long tresses, remove all her ornaments, wear only white saris and spend most of the time in some dark corner of the house or spends time in begging and doing small house hold works here and there as a wage labourer.

Widows are stigmatized

They are stigmatized as Evil eye, impure and they cannot participate in any auspicious programs Festivals. On the day of a man's death, his wife had to go through a ceremony in which other widowed women broke her bangles, eased the bindhi from her forehead and removed the thaali (Marriage Thread), which is the symbol of marriage, then the widow was given to wear white sari and it becomes her identity as a widow. People believed that seeing a widow while stepping out of the house was a bad sign and would bring bad luck. she is not eligible to bless the newly wedding couples. No matter how old is a woman, when she becomes widow she needs to follow all these things, she lost her respect as a wife and respectful person from that particular time. She needs to start her journey as a widow till her death with many rituals and restrictions. Widows have always been regarded as a symbol of misfortune and inauspicious at happy occasions. They are completely made to follow a severe discipline which made their existence a virtual social death. Goffman (1963) refers social stigma to a relationship of devaluation in which one individual is disqualified from social acceptance. Stigma can be physical, documentary, contextual, ascribed or achieved. In some instances the stigmatized person has relatively little control over the character or display of his/her disfigurement. In other words, the appearance may be so organized that revelation is suppressed or ambiguous in its impact. Its sociological significance reside in its importance for the analysis of information, management ascribed deviance and conventional character of social control. Widows, in all communities, suffer from limited freedom to participate in religious and auspicious social functions. They carry the stigma of inauspiciousness and hence, have to keep away from functions. They are not allowed to touch those objects used during marriage or religious ceremonies. A widow cannot cook rice fed to a prospective bride or bridegroom, nor can attend or even witness a marriage ceremony. In fact, a widow is not even entitled to perform the ritual to welcome her own daughter-in-law.

Humiliation faced by the widows of Vrindavan

S.No	Particulars	Government Ashrams	Private Ashrams	Street rented Ashrams	Total
1	Taunting	25	22	21	68 %
2	Beating	5	7	9	21 %
3	Starving	3	3	4	10 %
4	No humiliation faced	00	00	00	00 %
	Total				100 %

The above table shows that how much the widows had been suffered from the family members in different ways, here this study highlights the major problems which of the faces which they were faced with in the four walls of the home among all the respondents, 68percent said that they went through taunting, similarly 21 percent went through beating, 10 percent they didn't receive food from the family members. It shows that 100 percent of the widows humiliated at any point of their widowhood life.

Cultural Problems:

There are many problems faced by widows in their cultural way, they need to go through rites of passage Arnold van gennep (1960) from women to widows, from she to it, they remove their Bindi, bangales, bath with their husbands dead body cleaned water, and remove mangal suthra which is the symbol of marriage in indian Hindu society. Ranjan (1996) conducted a comparative study of the wellbeing of widows staying with their families and receiving pension, with those staying in Ashrams. Study states that in the Ashram, 90 percent of the inmates were from West Bengal. All are Hindus and from upper castes. In ashrams, widows had taken to vegetarianism after the death of their spouses. Social customs are being strictly followed by the widows in the ashram such as removal of sindoor and wearing of white clothes.

Psychological Problems:

Widows are going through major psychological problems in day to day life; they go through different types of Psychological Problems the major problems are depression, loneliness, feeling unwanted, anxiety, indifference, strain and stress. Each and every individual is going through one of the above listed symptoms in their day to day life. Sarah lamb (1993) says that widowed older women in India may face significant discrimination it might come from the family members and society in the form of direct and indirect words,

and psychological stress, need to follow the severe restrictions (experienced or perceived) as well as a lack of economic resources.

Economic Problems:

The common source of income of women living here includes Bhajan, Pension, Begging, Wages, and Gifts from the tourists. The types of accommodations, the widows of Vrindavan are facilitated is that women stay in rental, shelter homes and ashrams. Not all widows have access to well-maintained shelters as about a third of women live in open space like ghats, streets, bus stops and railway stations.

More than 85% of widows belong to poor or middle class families. Employment opportunities are very low especially because of the limitations on mobility and gender division of labour, so widows have been going through Economic Crises.

According to Venkateshwalru and Laxmipathi (2004) a large majority of elderly widows and divorced/separated are not economically active and withdraw them from active labour in comparison to the never married or currently married. It impacts on physical and mental strength which gradually decreases. Majority of the elderly widows also do not have their own homes in comparison to the married women. Economic inactiveness, economic dependency and lack of source of income and assets act as a barrier for elderly widows for taking loans from friends and known ones. According to Usha Rani and V. Sreedevi (2008), a paper entitled “ Familial Support and Filial Care-A Study of Elderly Widows” the changing value system of the society and splitting up of the joint families has a negative impact on the elderly widows as they are regarded as burdensome by the families. The study highlights that elderly widows working in the unorganized sector and staying with their married sons are perceived as more burdensome by these sons. The elderly widows feel that they are perceived as a burden by the family members and as a result, are neglected and feel unwanted. Elderly widows in the unorganized sector report a greater humiliation and abuse by their family members as compared to those in the organized sector. There is less feeling of deprivation and of being a burden in widows working in the organized sector.

Discussion and Conclusion

Widowhood is a curse to woman and from ages she has been exploited, humiliated and deprived from decency in living. It is a typical life situation. The widowhood brought it with the stigma of impurity for the unfortunate woman, created feelings of moral aversion and distrust towards her, compelling her to lead a life of stern asceticism. In some parts of the country widow is expected to cut her long hair, wear only white sarees and spend most her time to sing bhajans. She is kept away from the auspicious programs and festivals. Even she cannot give blessing to her own children in the marriages, and she cannot take lead to celebrate creedal ceremony of her own grandson or granddaughter.

The tragedy of widows, particularly in Hindu society, is horrific especially in religious towns such as Vrindavan and its streets. The north Indian religious cities of Vrindavan contain hubs of widows. Widows from different parts of the country continue to migrate to this city for the peaceful life as they suffered from multi problems with sad and troubling life. The number of widows living in Vrindavan mostly migrated from the West Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and from other states such as Bihar, Karnataka and Tamilnadu. There are approximately 20,000 widows who alone live in the streets of Vrindavan, which is a tourist place in the Uttar Pradesh, India situated on the bank of Yamuna. The migrated widows are having different problems such as social, cultural and Economic problems; they have experience of ill treatment that is 48 percent by in-laws, 17 percent by Children, 21 percent by daughter in law. They have experience of humiliation, taunting, beating, and not getting meals with respective percentages that is 68, 21, and 10 percentages. To escape from all these discrimination, widows do not have property in their deceased husband's name; 86 percent of the deceased husbands don't have property by that obviously widows do not have property in their names.

To escape from problems and discrimination, widows are migrating from the native places to Vrindavan but their destiny and fortune doesn't get change. They have been going through different types of issues and problems regarding socio-cultural and economic problems. This is the time to show light upon the problems as an individual and organization all together to eradicate discrimination and provide dignity and decent life to the widows.

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