

Research Article

Widowhood in India

ZebaHasan

Associate Professor, Department of Fine Arts, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India
Email id: zebart987@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The roots of practicing orthodox tradition of widowhood prescribed by ancient Indian religion is remote and deep rooted in the psychology of a large number of Indian people and even after 65 years of independence people are unable to denounce this inhuman practice. People belonging to rural areas, tribal community and so on observe this fatal phenomenon, which is related with female gender and consider the sufferer deprived from all rights to live or enjoy life further and thought of as dead persons. A huge number of such victims still ditched under the shadow of death and gloominess, discarded by their own kith and kin and lawfully separated from their own possessed affluence. According to the religious doctrine, it is pronounced that widows are destined to suffer according to their Karma (deeds) of previous birth, with this belief any scope of sympathy for widows gets diminished and they left abandoned for pre-destined torment. This catastrophic and heartrending state of Indian widows is discussed here elaborately and analytically, which is also throwing light on prejudice treatment particularly with women. Evidences still prevail in contemporary religio-social structure of India, which are the basis of narration.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, Widowhood, Orthodox, Prejudiced, Exploitation, Destitute

INTRODUCTION

The crisis of widowhood in India is profoundly a traumatic experience. It is the high point of human endurance to be a woman and at the same time a widow. On one hand, a woman suffers from a personal loss, and on the other hand, she undergoes worst indiscrimination. Overlooking the intensity of her tragedy, the orthodox prejudiced system treats her as cursed. In extreme cases, her feeling of loss and sense of alienation makes a living ghost out of her. This is so unrealistically discriminating that our traditional systems have learned to overlook that generally the age gap between a girl and boy is so disproportionate that a girl's widowhood is inevitable. It is the tradition that contributes to design such a destiny for a woman where she faces the worst victimization and helplessness. In Indian religion, law permits a man

to remarry but widowed women are generally denied such a choice.

With fractured identity due to economic deprivation, socio-cultural marginalization and loss of self-esteem most widows do not wish to live after widowhood. The economic deprivation is believed to be one of the most tragic consequences that drive a widow suicidal.

Moreover, the sole reason of her economic deprivation lies in the patriarchal nature of society where women are confined to supplementary roles. In her natal home, she is generally groomed in order to make a best house wife. Her any attempt at making herself a self-sufficient individual is discouraged, which makes her ever dependant on someone or the other. And after her husband's death, she is eventually rendered helpless and crippled.

In India, various statistical sources press the fact that socio-cultural discrimination of widows is very evident among the Hindu majority. The Hindu system treats a widow as physically alive but socially dead. (Giri, 2002).

In the Brahminical patriarchy, woman parenthood as described in Vedas and Upanishads is assigned a secondary role. (Giri, 2002). A woman is considered nonentity until she is not married. As stated in the book, 'Living Death' edited by V. Mohini Giri, 'Widowhood in India amongst the higher castes is a state of societal death. The widow's social death stems from her alienation from reproduction and sexuality, following the death of her husband. She is excluded from the functioning social unit of the family. Once a widow, she is no longer the daughter-in-law, daughter or wife and is not an individual anymore.' (Giri, 2002). In other words, she is stripped bare of all the basic attributions of a social human being—a no-entity. Meera Khanna presents a data of the reasons in her article entitled 'why widow should not live?' which are mentioned as under:

Reasons	Urban %	Rural %	Total %
Difficult without bread winner	58.00	78.67	68.33
Strict religious taboos	17.34	6.67	12.00
Loss of status	19.33	11.33	15.34

(Giri, 2002)

From classical texts, the codes of conduct for upper caste widows are as much disheartening and dreadful. For instance, in Dharmasastras (200BC-200AD), Manusmriti states: 'A virtuous wife should never do anything displeasing to the husband who took her hand in marriage, when he is alive or dead, if she longs for her husband's world (after death)' (Chakravarti and Gill 2007).

'When her husband is dead she may practice Vrata (fasting—a religious ritual) as much as she likes, living on auspicious flowers, roots and fruits, if she longs for her husband's world (after death).' (Manusmriti, 156-169), (Chakravarti and Gill 2007). Which means a widow should not even mention the name of another man. She should be long-suffering until death, self-restrained, chaste, striving (to fulfill) the unsurpassed duty of woman.

'Many thousands of priests who were chased from their youth have gone to heaven without begetting offspring to continue the family. A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband has died goes to heaven just like those chaste men, even if she has no sons.' (Manusmriti, 156-169) (Chakravarti and Gill 2007). Various other such prescriptions range from impositions, imposed sacrifice to warnings, for example: 'A widow should give up chewing betel nut, wearing perfumes, flowers, ornaments and dyed clothes, taking two meals a day, should wear only white garments, curb her senses and anger and sleep on the ground.' Vriddha Harita (c.600-900), (XI.205-10) (Chakravarti and Gill 2007).

Condition of widows in India is pathetic in comparison to other countries. The reason being this cruel, inhuman custom has been an integral part of indigenous culture and tradition, followed not only by lower class but also by higher class as well. Since 1857, many researchers, eminent historians and sociologists are contemplating, discussing and writing on the subject. Professor B.A. Gupta from Calcutta approached Sir Herbert Risley to get published compiled essays under the title 'Position of Women: Experience of Girls and Widows'. The essays in typescript form are currently located in the collection of India Office Record Library, London. (Chakravarti and Gill 2007).

In one of essays, there is an incident quoted that some people asked a widowed woman that how it is possible for her own parents to give her so much pain. For which she replied: 'Yes! It is the custom, the social customary law that compels them to do so! Even the father dare not accept the sandalwood and flower arranged by his own dear widow child for the worship of his ideals. Even her own dear mother dare not accept food at her hand. She cannot move about, as she is treated like an untouchable low cast women' (Chakravarti and Gill 2007). What can that poor helpless widowed daughter do in such a state of society, if her own mother who gives her birth begins to treat her like this? Further, the question arises, and then who is going to rescue her (widow daughter) from sufferings. Radhabani Inamdar informs that 'Kanara' is an organization which is a centre of torture on widows. (Chakravarti and Gill 2007).

After survey and case study, Mohini Giri has written a detailed data on widows in India in the research

article entitled 'Widows: The discriminated victims'. She mentioned that 'majority widows have no knowledge of their rights; they are considered as women who are inauspicious, inconsequential, insecure and third rate citizens.' (Giri, 2002). The facts and figures of the data by Mohini Giri are given below:

1. There are 33 million widows in India (1991 census);
2. 9 percent of the total female populations are widows;
3. Every fourth household in India has a widow; 50 percent of the widows are over 50 years;
4. A sample study of 1994 shows that of 88 percent widows who remained in the deceased husband's village after his death, only 3 percent shared the same hearth with their in-laws. Also less than 3 percent widows lived with their parents;
5. In the age group of 60 years, 64 percent are widows. Widow's pension range from Rs.100 to Rs. 500;
6. On a seven state rural widow study, there were only 28 percent widows eligible for pension; 155 were actually receiving it (the pension);
7. There are approximately 20,000 war widows in India of the 1962, 1965, 1971, 1989 and 1999 aggressions. (Giri, 2002).

A widow is treated like a low class maid servant and usually kept in an abundant area of the house, not allowed to visit the main areas of the residence. If she is treated in this manner under her father's roof then how is she being treated in the house of her father-in-law? (Chakravarti and Gill 2007). In the marriage ceremonies and other auspicious occasions, a widow is not allowed to participate or to show her appearance, she is considered as bad omen. If she appears on the time of arrival or departure of guests, it is considered as bad sign. In Hindu society, a widow has to face a lot. For a widow it is a sin to take two meals, it is a sin to remain tidy, it is a sin to wish for or ask for everything in the world, and she is taken as without feeling and without emotions like a stone on the road. '..... the poor wife is simply ruined! To her, the whole world is void!' (Chakravarti and Gill 2007).

In India, Kashi, Mathura, Vrindavan and Haridwar are the recognized places as per Indian religion and mythology where socially depersonalized (abandoned)

widows from all over the country are usually sent to spend their life in Bhakti for attaining salvation, but when surveys are done and recorded the condition of widows which came in front of the whole world is surprisingly unbelievable. Meera Khanna elaborately elucidates the tragedy of widows in her research paper entitled 'Widowhood in India: Trauma of taboos and tribulations' that 'The tragedy of the widows of Vrindavan and for that matter of Varanasi, Vrindavan and Mathura etc., goes far beyond the physical starvation, economic deprivation and cultural neglect. It is the agony of being nothing. They are the *shunya* of Indian society-abandoned by the relations, marginalized by society and neglected by tradition. There is the tradition of depersonalization. They have nowhere to go, nothing to do and nobody to extend helping hand. There are approximately 10,000-12,000 widows in Vrindavan and surrounding areas. They are brought to the pretext of pilgrimage and then left to make a pilgrimage on the path of hunger, poverty and humiliation.' (Giri 2002). Some instances are disused below:-

Widows in Kashi

Widowhood is a widely known tradition in the Hindu society where a woman is confronted with the most critical challenge of survival. Baidyanath Saraswati confirms this fact in his research article entitled 'The Kashiwasi widows: A study in cultural ideology and crisis' that 'the widowhood is a widely known feature of Hindu society.' (Nagesh, Nair and Katti, 1988). A widow suffers a lot not only because of the death of her husband but also because it is quite challenging for her to come in terms with society.

Kashi is a very famous religious place in Varanasi revered by Hindus. A city having a number of 'Vidhya Ashrams' where the widows lead a life of ascetic austerity and follow the rigorous age-old codes of conduct laid down for strict adherence in order to obtain salvation. Baidyanath Saraswati also highlights the purpose of widows living in Kashi, 'The Kashiwasi widows are the special ones who live in Kashi (Varanasi) religiously, with a view to obtaining *punya* and reaching *mukti* at the moment of death.' (Nagesh, Nair and Katti, 1988).

'Kashivas' is a way of life meant for the old, who are mostly either abandoned or forced by the circumstances to leave their home. Kashi also remains to be one of the

destinies, in the midst of no-destiny, for widows. Many young widows are living there, as old women who have rejected aspirations of life. Among the Kashivasi widows, it is discovered by Baidyanath Saraswati that the number of young widows, below 26, is small (0.64) and those in the age group of 61-75 from the majority (67.73). Of the Kashi widows, 99 percent were married before they come of age and most (60.22 percent) of them are childless. Most of widows had to leave their home under compelling circumstances. (Nagesh, Nair and Katti, 1988).

Baidyanath Saraswati elucidates in his research paper that majority of Kashivasi widows lead a secluded life, almost excommunicated and lead a secluded life. Sometimes, it is the in-laws or parents who bring their young widows to Kashi. Being illiterate and having no idea of this world, they are left themselves without any concept of destiny. (Nagesh, Nair and Katti, 1988). In one of the TV serials featured on Color Channel called 'Maat Pita Ke Charno Main' is quite illustrative of the cruelties widows facing in Kashi. They never visit their home and nobody pays a visit to them. It is unthinkable to imagine the intensity of their painful experience for having no contact with their family members and being deprived of any touch with the social life or the outside world (Nagesh, Nair and Katti, 1988). Baidyanath Saraswati further says, 'Majority of the Kashivasi widows are from the middle class family. More than half of them receive no economic support from their parents' or husband's family. The poor class ranks are equal with the upper class in not supporting their widows in Kashi.' (Nagesh, Nair and Katti, 1988). More than half of the Kashivasi widows are illiterates; and only 1.81% have received more than 10 years of schooling. (Nagesh, Nair and Katti, 1988).

Many old widows have to work real hard for food, and many of them turn to begging from door to door for a piece of bread. Baidyanath Saraswati presents the fact that 'Begging is the primary source of livelihood of 9 percent Kashivasi widows.' (Nagesh, Nair and Katti, 1988).

More than half of the Kashivasi widows live in the rented houses; about 4 percent are having their own houses. At one time, there were many *dharmashalas* and pilgrims where widows were allowed to live. (Nagesh, Nair and Katti 1988).

'Ideally, a widow must exemplify the life of austerity; even she can afford a comfortable living. 61.2 percent of Kashivasi widow give priority to their religious ritual needs over the secular necessity of life. Even the beggar widows (12.2%) set apart some amount, from whatever little they have, for religious expenses.' (Nagesh, Nair and Katti, 1988).

Child widows

'Although law forbids child marriages, this is still practiced in many part of India especially in Rajasthan where on the festivals Akka Teej Day and Basant-panchami (festivals) thousands of young children get married. Many of these marriages take place with a much older man, soon leaving the child as a widow, who then has to live a life of a recluse in the society.' (Giri, 2002).

Gandhiji was especially considerate of the young widows. Jyotsna Kamat quotes that in the past 80 years, girls used to get married very early and after untimely deaths of their husbands, they were condemned to a life of great agony, shaving heads, living in isolation and shunned by the society. Gandhiji once noted during his legendary travels across India that he never came across 13-year-old girl who was not married. It is also noticeable and surprising that Gandhiji himself was 13-year-old when he got married as per the tradition of Indian custom. (Kamat 1998).

'*Water*' a famous feature film by Deepa Mehta and the last in her 'elements trilogy' is set in 1938 in British-ruled India and against the background of the rise of Mahatma Gandhi and the anti-colonial movement. "The story begins when 8-year-old Chuyia (Sarala), a victim of child-marriages still widely practiced in India at that time, learns that her 50-year-old husband has died. According to Hindu custom widows had three options: to marry their husband's younger brother; throw themselves on their dead husband's funeral pyre or lead a life of self-denial. The young girl, who can barely even remember getting married, let alone understand what she now faces, is dispatched by her father to an ashram or widow's home in the Hindu holy city of Varanasi on the Ganges River. She has her head shaved and is expected to spend the rest of life in the poverty-stricken institution with no possessions or personal income and segregated from the rest of society. Distraught and bewildered Chuyia eventually settles into ashram life with 14 other

widows in the decrepit building. A domineering and corrupt old widow, Madhumati rules the ashram. She smokes marijuana every night provided by the eunuch and local pimp Gulabi. Madhumati and Gulabi earn additional income, some of which is used to sustain the ashram by prostituting the beautiful young widow Kalyani to the local Brahmins or high-caste gentry across the river. Kalyani, whose hair was not shaved in order to make her more attractive to her clients, lives in separate quarters in the institution. *Water, a movie by Meera Nair* also powerfully points to some of the underlying economic factors behind the dispossession of widows. As Narayan explains, when widows are segregated from their husband, family and property, they are: ‘One less mouth to feed. Four saris saved. One bed and a corner are saved in the family house. There is no other reason why you are sent here. And while the treatment of widows is disguised as religion’. He concludes, ‘It’s all about money.’ These few sentences elaborate the situation in an extremely powerful manner. (Wijesiriwardena and Zora 2006).”

Widows of Vrindavan

A woman’s identity undergoes hideous transformations when she becomes a widow. Vrindavan is one such place where it seems time is frozen and civilization has come to a dead halt. The place is possessed with haunting stories of survival and exploitation that for a while one believes that humanity itself is at stake.

The most alarmingly exotic image, which has been circulating in various forms of cultural expression especially cinema, is the woman in white with a shaved head. ‘The women in white with shaven heads congregate at the *Bhajanashram* to sing praises to Lord Krishna but their singing is labored, dismal and dirge-like. The *Bhajanashrams* claim to provide charity to ‘the poorest of the poor’ yet what they give for eight hours of forced singing is not a living wage. After the morning session which begins at 7 a.m., the women are expected to sing for four hours and then they receive food coupons that entitle them to one pao of rice and fifty grams of dal-uncooked. Similarly in the evening they are required to sing for another four hours and then they get a paltry Rs. 2 for their labour. The following account has been given by Dipti Prita Mehrotra and is based on her visit to Vrindavan in 1998.’ (Chakravarti and Gill 2007).

According to the 1991 census of India, there are 33 percent widows in India. (Giri 2002). This is because in Hinduism it is considered a great sin if anybody has an unmarried daughter at their home if she has reached the age of puberty, (Goswami 2007). ‘Dharma Shastra’ states that ‘the marriage of a girl should take place before she has her first menses’. It further illustrates that ‘a 30-year-old man should marry a girl of 12 years and a 24-year-old man should marry a girl of 8 years.’ (Goswami 2007). The custom of pre-puberty marriages was common among Brahmins and those who followed the commands of the Smriti writers. (Goswami 2007).

Exploitation of widows and destitute in Vrindavan

Calcutta, March 25: A West Bengal government sponsored survey on widows in Vrindavan, the findings of which were made public on Friday confirmed circumstantial evidence of continuing ‘sexual exploitation’ of widows in the holy town. (Nagchoudhury 2000).

The report stated there were less ‘visible institutions’ apart from those providing a religious refuge to destitute women, who seemed to pursue trades that are illegal and exploitative. The ‘devadasi’ system itself makes a woman open to sexual abuse and the ‘service’ done to the rich and the powerful pilgrims are seen as a form of piety. The team felt that it was not so much the influx of aged widows but that of young girls being brought here from West Bengal and other states by possible ‘trafficking agents’, which needed to be investigated thoroughly. (Nagchoudhury 2000).

The presence of a large number of ‘thriving abortion clinics’ in Mathura is yet another indicator of the exploitation of the womenfolk, the study mentioned. The team members came across unconfirmed reports of girls being brought from rural areas of Bengal, Orissa and Bangladesh and sold to men from certain local communities in Vrindavan. (Nagchoudhury 2000).

There are approximately 10,000–12,000 widows in Vrindavan and surrounding areas. In a survey conducted in Vrindavan by V. Mohini Giri, it was found that ‘more than 75% of widows were living without any family support. Only 6.2% were visited by their family members, while more than 13.25% were depended on the Bhajan ashrams for their soul support. Philanthropic

rich men have started Bhajan ashrams so that the widows could sing kirtan for 25 grams of rice and Rs. 2. There are two shifts of singing Bhajans. If these old widows who can hardly drag themselves do not reach in time for the shift, then they are shunted out.' (Giri 2002). Consequently, they stay hungry without their supper if not sung for hours.

A trend as old as Middle Ages still persists in the pilgrim circuit of Varanasi-Mathura-Vrindavan as a last resort for widows. Under the pretext of fulfilling religious duties in old age, the tradition also serves as a convenient excuse for families to get rid of women they no longer want.

Vrindavan hosts thousands of women among which most of them are widows of various age groups. But being a young widow invites extra exploitation and insecurity. They happen to be more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and lead a painfully fear-ridden life.

It is always a great problem to find a shelter in these small towns brimming with widows. Many are left with no choice but to sleep in the open courtyards, therefore, more prone for sexual exploitation. What makes things even worse for them is to face the utmost hostility from the local people who treat them as cursed and address them with all the possible bad names. Ishita Majumdar in her research article entitled 'Widows of Vrindavan: A study' provides an account of the most rampant forms of exploitation of widows in Vrindavan, which are mentioned as under:

1. At least eight women involved in the sex trade were identified with the help of the local people. They are lived in Nidhivan, Sewakunj, Kesighat and Gaura colony.
2. A large percentage (54 percent) of the respondents said they had to obey the pandas (pandits) without questioning them.
3. Those who have said Vrindavan is not safe for a single women (about 46 percent), pointed out increasing anti-social activities as the reason. One of the respondents says, "if a girl moves alone in Seva-kunj at night she never comes back..."
4. Some women who migrated with family from West Bengal were earning through sex trade and their husbands were working as agents/pimps these

families were living in small colonies like Gaura colonies.

5. According to local gynecologist frequent cases of abortion widows/destitute women who come with local people or pandas (pandit) posing as there husband. (Giri 2002).

Income source of the widow women-

1. Through Bhajans in the Ashrams were mentioned as a source of income, initially it was found that only 7.2 percent widows were dependent solely on it.
2. More than 77 percent of the respondents were earning money from multiple sources. The three main sources of income were begging, singing Bhajan in the ashrams, receiving charity, etc. one significant observation was the begging is not considered to be below one's dignity, rather it was looked upon as a blessing from the God.
3. Only 178 widows were getting pension (very meager amount) from the Government. (Giri 2002).

During the course of study most of the widows mentioned that getting pension was the most difficult and complicated task for them as they had to go to Mathura (which is 16 km from Vrindavan). 'Government can make the procedure of distribution easier. Here help can be taken from local Government machinery as well as local active NGOs. Government should increase the amount of pension because Rs. 120 is not enough amount for a single person to maintain herself.' (Giri 2002).

It is indeed a sorryful state that so much efforts have been put in through education, judiciary acts, various government's schemes, social organization's movements from last two and a half centuries to resolve the problems of widow and to provide them justice and rights to live as an independent individual, but probably the thought of meaningless life after the death of husband is imbibed in psychology itself. A difference can also be noticed on the basis of class, religion, cast and geographical lines. The fact cannot be denied that death of one partner creates imbalance on various fronts of life, especially when the wife is uneducated, however, this fact should be taken as challenge of nature's system. Emotional loss can never be fulfilled but of course problems related with material world can be handled. Educational awareness and the permission of second marriage have resolved the

Widowhood in India

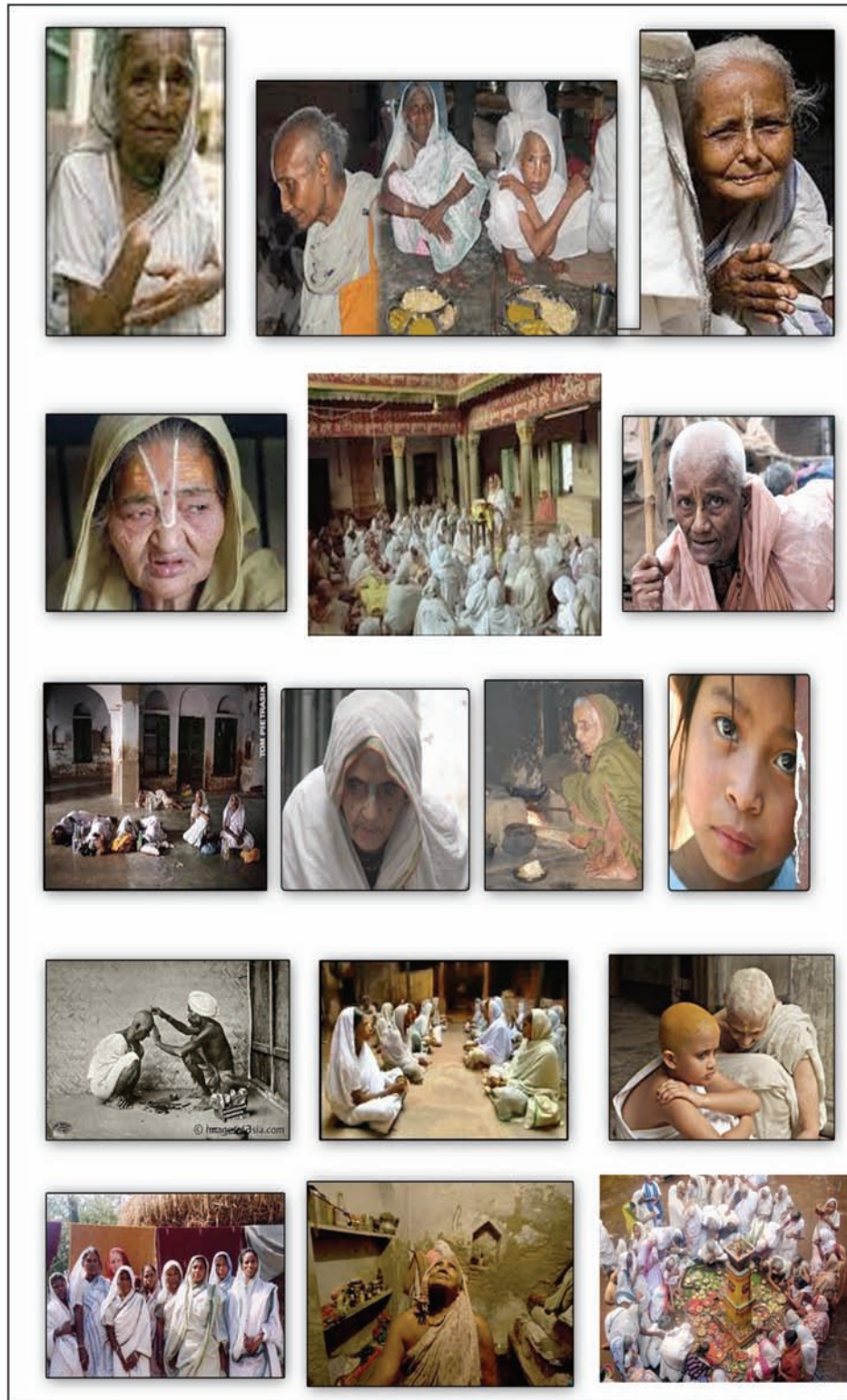


Figure 1: Widows of Contemporary India

problem to some extent but it is mostly accepted in high and middle-class society. People who are still living in remote areas, gripped with orthodox religio-cultural beliefs, still following unethical system.

In vice-versa cases, problems are not much serious when wife dies. Indian religions do not treat the situation of widower as inhumanly as female widow. Hence, gender discrimination or dual treatment of the same situation is obvious in the case of widow and widower.

REFERENCES

- Chakravarti, U. and Gill, P. (2007).** *Shadow Lives: Writing on Widowhood*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press/Zubaan Publications: 37-38, 92-93, 93, 188.
- Giri, V.M. (Ed.). (2002).** *Living Death: Trauma of Widowhood*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House: 11,32,34,43-44,123,128,221,222-223,226.
- Goswami, S. (2007).** *Female Infanticide and Child Marriage*. Jaipur: Rawat Publication: 26,28,30.
- Kamat, J. (1998).** *Mahatma Gandhi's Experiments with Truth Involved and Affected Women's Status in the 20th Century in India*. Excerpts from a lecture given at the Gandhi Peace Foundation in December 1998. Available at: <http://www.kamat.com/mmgandhi/gwomen.htm>. (Last accessed on 02 February 2013) Section 4.
- Nagchoudhury, S. (2000).** *Vrindavan Widows Are Still Sexually Exploited—Study*. Published in Indian Express on Sunday, March 26, 2000, Available at: expressindia.indianexpress.com/news/ie/daily/20000326/ifr26039.html (Last accessed on 21 August 2013).
- Nagesh, H.V., Nair, P.S. and Katti, A.P. (1988).** *Widowhood in India*, A collection of papers presented at the National Seminar held at Dharwad in March 1987, organized by Sri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara Educational Trust, Ujire and Janata Sikshan Samiti, published by SDME Trust, Dharwad, Karnatka: 103,104-105,106.
- Wijesiriwardena, P. and Zora, P. (2006).** *The plight of widows in India: Water* a Film written and directed by Deepa Mehta, 15 May 2006'. Available at: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/may2006/wate-m15.shtml> (Last accessed on 21 August 2013).