



*International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)*  
*A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal*  
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)  
Volume-II, Issue-IV, January 2016, Page No. 196-201  
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711  
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

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## **Different shades of widows of Benaras based on their socio economic status**

**Moumita Dey**

*JRF fellow, University of Calcutta, Department of Geography, W. B., India*

### **Abstract**

*Over the decades widows of Benaras has been considered as an important research topic for social scientists and feminist scholars of India and world. Most researchers have tried to analyse the socio economic condition of this marginalised group in different time. From their research some important issues related to social economical problem of widows has been clearly identified. Benaras can be considered as one of the rehabilitation hub for the destitute widows of Indian society. Widows mainly from east India choose this place as their secure shelter of widowhood. We never deny that social structure and social process of a particular society is controlled by different variables like demography, economy, cultural background, political settings, and psychological perception of social groups. According to differentiation among these variables sometimes a social group can be divided into different sub social groups and each group represent different scenario of a particular society. Widows are the poor victims of a rigid, irrelevant, ancient custom of Hindu society. They are forced to give up every comforts and desires. They are convicted without any faults from their side. In Indian society according to class and caste structure religious tradition and restriction is varied from one to another. In higher class and higher caste society, women have to face more social restriction. In case of lower class women financial contribution is the main determinates of their authority over resources within family and society, this social custom mainly indulge in women dependency on their male counterpart. In widowhood when they lost their husband they totally lost their hope of life. This problem can be overcome by sympathetic attitude of their family members towards them and through their financial security. Unfortunately this authority is only applicable in the case of higher class widow women and lower class employed women. Middle class women deprived of these both facilities and their condition seemed worst than others. These issues are clearly identified in the case of widows of Benaras. For this reason, according to demographic characteristics widows of Benaras are divided into different groups. Each group of widows have different characteristics related to their economic and social condition, work environment, recreation pattern. This study should attempt to represent this different shade of widows in detail. This study will be useful to frame new development policies for the widows of Benaras according to their present socio economic status.*

***Key Words: Widow, groups, society, customs, shades.***

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**Introduction:** For last several decades Benaras has been considered as a secure rehabilitation hub for the destitute widows of India. Widowhood is a stigmatised state of women's life. In an orthodox Hindu society widow women are forced to get rid of all their desires and comforts in order to

maintain a desireless (mokshahin) life after their husband's death. India's social structure is controlled by different social customs, norms, and rules. These customs vary from one place to another. According to socio-economic background. For these reasons, social groups are divided into different sub groups. Each sub groups are unique and they maintain their own identity even when they are in marginalised position in a society. Widows of Benaras are the perfect examples for this discussion. They belong to different classes of Hindu society. In Benaras, they create their own social space which reflects their socio economic background.

**Study area:** In Benaras, widows mainly stay at rented house at bangali tola, oldage homes, and at different Ghats along the course of the Ganges. Interviews were taken in this place at different times of the day.

**Literature review:** Literature review is the most important part to design a frame work for a proposed research paper. Widows of Benaras have been in the limelight of Indian literature since the early eightys. In Indian epics and puranas the life cycle of an ideal man has been divided into four stages (Dhanoa, 2010). In first stage (bhrmhacharya) he is trained to become a well householder while in the second stage (garhosthyo) he maintain his household duties, get married, maintain his lineage. In last two stages (banprostho and sanyas) he and his wife remove themselves from the bondage of family and society to spend a life renouncing the physical world. In every stage a woman helps a man there by rightfully performing her duties as mother, lover, wife, and sister, daughter. Her happiness lies within the happiness of her husband and family members. A woman is only able to perform her role in the last three stages if she has the company of her husband. Her husband's death pushes her into the life of widowhood. Sometimes she may be accused of her husband's death. She is advised to spend a life of salvation, devoid of ever'y comfort, enjoyments, happiness. As a consequence till now Indian women pray to die before her husband demise (as a sati). In the early days women were married at young age to older men. Childhood widowhood was the ultimate climax of their life. They had to face physical, sexual, psychological harassment at the hands of society. In a report published by A. mackenzey (1872) ( Chatterjee, 1993)) it was sharply pointed out that in Bengal the prostitute class seems to be chiefly recruited from the ranks of Hindu widows. In 1856 when widow remarriage act was passed, it was practised in fewer parts of the Hindu society. Young, beautiful, childhood widows became a moral panic for their family members. To get rid of this unexpected burden they were sent to Varanasi or kashi. There the widows started living in groups but due to financial crisis they were compelled to serve the rich people of Banaras as mistress (water, Deepa Mehta). After independence women education and empowerment became an important issue in the eyes of the Indian government but social norms yet function to keep women financially dependent upon men. Even educated women are denied a career in order to serve her husband as "grihalaxmi". In most Hindu families women do not have own property and are deprived of the share of parental property. Due to such reasons, problems are in the same place. In recent years Govt has launched some policies for widows but it has some constrains too. The pension paid to a widow is extremely low (Verma, 2005). Only sonless, homeless, destitute widows are provided with the pensions (Verma, 2005). They have to undergo different complex, official procedure which they find quite difficult. Only a few of them could finally obtain pension at the end. In case of the upper class widows situation somewhat different, out of social reputation of families and financial security assured to them by their dead husband, widow can spend their life with respect and dignity in their household whereas in lower class widowhood never changes the women's life at all. They are self-dependent. Middle class widows are the worst sufferer of this

custom. In joint families they do not get any share of marital property. Due to lack of practical knowledge they are cheated by the family members and spend a life full of grief and depression.

**Significance:** Widows are the marginalised group of Indian society. Most of the researchers have discussed about the socio economic condition of widows in Varanasi in general. Widows from communities and status of India reside in Benaras. The differentiation is also found in their demography, economic condition, home environment and recreation pattern. Based on these parameters I have tried to analyse their present status in society in my paper.

**Objectives:**

1. This study should attempt to classify the widows of Benaras into different categories.
2. It will analyse their demographic characteristics.
3. It will highlight their present economic condition separately.
4. This paper will discuss about home environments recreation pattern, health condition of widows of different groups.
5. This paper will find out the problems of widows of different group and recommend some solution to make out their problems.

**Methodology:** In this survey, stratified random sampling method is applied. All the data are **primary**. In this paper I applied observation (Liewelyn, 2007) as the most important tool for my data collection. Data were collected from five widows of each group. Here I have used **class** as **independent variable** and economic condition, home environment. Recreation pattern, perception of widowhood as **dependant variables**.

**Why are they different?**

To classify the widows of Benaras I have applied the class theory. Social scientists are different in their opinion about the concept of class. According to social scientist MISS ARENDT'S (Boyle (1952)) *'class is something taken more or less for granted by the average person who has to have a reasonably good knowledge of the structure of the society which he operates, though the knowledge need not to defined and schematised.* In case of Indian widows "class concept" was planted in their mind through social practices, family traditions, at their natal and marital house. It can be said that widow's class consciousness is the reflection of their socio economic background. According to Marx Boyle (1952) *"class position is closely connected with objective factors of wealth and occupation"*. Add to this context I have classified them according to their class and consider some indicators of social well-being like home environment, wealth, economic condition, life style, as the parameters for classification.

**Major findings**

**Widows of higher class:** Higher class hindu widows who live at Benaras are very few in number. They stay at the rented houses of bangali tola. They belong to higher caste or intermediate caste. They are bengali and came from different part of greater kolkata. They are mainly bangladeshi by origin. They got married at an early age (>20). They had more than one child. They had enough property and monetary savings in banks. They studied at school upto primary level. They came to this place to attain peace in their latter life. They however stay in contact with their children. From my conversation with them I understood that after their husband's demice they lost their supreme authority in their families. Later they faced problems with their sons and daughters in law. To get rid of these problems they have choosen to lead their lives in Benaras. They kept a safe distance from other widows. They live in separate room and appoint maid servants. They had electricity

connection in rented houses. They always keep their rooms neat and clean. they take their meals three times a day. They are vegetarian. But important nutritious food like milk, fruit, constitute in their regular food habit. They are conscious about their health condition. They take proper medicines (allopathy or homeopathy according to doctor's counsel). These widows are very orthodox and highly superstitious. In their leisure hours they chat with each other and listen to musics on radios. They are well aware of the society condition and are not ignorant. They talk about the present incidents occurring in different parts of India. In all they have a very strict and strong personality. Widowhood have changed their status in their family. To get rid of worldly possessions and family bindings they stay at Benaras.

**Widows of middle class:** Middle class widows are the worst sufferers. They came from bengal and some of them have lived here with their families for several years. Migrant widows stay at oldage home. These oldage home authority provide them with food, clothes all free of cost. They were devoted housewives. They became helpless with their husband's death. They were sent away from home to Benaras by their own children and relatives who look down upon them as extra burden an extra mouth to feed. They were rescued by ngos and local people. Oldage home authority took care of them properly but they gave up every hope. They thought their existence was meaningless. One can hear them pleading "amai bari nie jaba (*can you take me to my home*)", widows who live with their families work as servants in mandirs and get monthly pension from government. Their relatives never allow them to chat with their friends inside their room. I got a chance to talk to them at ghats, or courtyards. They take meal twice a daily. They are vegetarian. They cook their own food, go to market for shopping. In their leisure hours they visit the temples and spend most of their time there. They take homeopathy and kabiraji totka for their health problems. They do not have child. They have been suffering from mental torchure by the society.

**Widows of lower class:** These widows are beggars. They are childhood widows. They mainly belong to the rural area of Assam and Bihar. In a joint family structure a widow is always treated as an extra burden. For a illiterate widow it was not an easy task to find a suitable job in rural areas. So these widows came to benaras and started begging. This work do no demand educational knowledge and it is not as hard as other works. They occasionally work in mandir or in tourist hotel. They get lunch at Annapurna mandir. They stay at temporary tents at the stairs of ghats. Govt and NGOs organise free medical check-up for them once in a month. Some of them work as maid servants in rented houses of bangali tola. They were colourfull sarees. They are least interested to talk about their past life. As they have been badly humiliated by family members and husbands, they do not have any sweet memories of their married life. They are always heard saying "ami baba Biswanather kache bhalo achi. (*I am happy in the guidance of shiva*)"

From this discussion we can easily understand the different shades of widows in Benaras. They are all poor victims, but their sufferings and perception are not same everywhere. Higher class widows left their families out of insecurity complex where as middle class widows were sent to Benaras without their consent. Lower class widows came to benaras to become self-dependent. These facts represent some well-known problem of women in a patriarchal society like financial and social insecurity, male domination, helplessness. In Benaras higher class widows they get a chance to spend a dignified life with respectable position in peer group. They hold a strong position in widow community which make them keep up their self-confidence. In case of middle class widows "widowhood" seemed to be accurate for them. They have always been the motivated and devoted housewives. They strictly follow the concept of purana ( women is the property of their father then their husband and lastly their sons). In last stage when they were deprived of their children sympathy

and caring attitude they consider themselves as sinners or offenders of some unknown offence to the God. Economic dependency filled their lives with sufferings. Lower class widows were not at all satisfied with their marital status. So widowhood never really brought any change in their lives. They are self-dependant, strong, powerful symbol of today's nari shakti.

**Table no: 1, classification of widows based on different parameters**

| parameters         | Widows of ashram  | Widows of oldage home      | Widows of ghat   |
|--------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|------------------|
| origin             | West Bengal       | West Bengal                | Bihar, Assam     |
| Caste              | Brahmin, kayastha | Kayastha                   | sc               |
| Age                | 50-80             | 60-70                      | 70-80            |
| Living place       | Ashram            | Old age home               | Ghat             |
| Source of food     | Own expence       | Old age home               | Annapurna mandir |
| Source of medicine | Medicine shop     | Old age home authority     | Ngo              |
| Reason of coming   | Find peace        | Forcibly send by relatives | Own decission    |
| Source of income   | Pension, savings  | -                          | begging          |

**Source:** field survey,

**Opinion about choice of this place:** Higher class widows came here just to get peace. They want to avoid daily family problem. while middle class widows were sent here forcibly by their own close ones. Lower class widows came here as they do not have any shelter. Each widow group is satisfied with the present socio economic condition of Benars. Ngo and Govt have arranged free medical check-up for them. Local people and tourist maintain cordial relationship with widows. Oldage home authority take care of them carefully. Beggars widows get help from tourist. They take their meal from Annapurna mandir. They do not have to face the mental or physical oppression of antisocial or political parties there. They were isolated from their family members at their own house. Their lifestyle, food habbits were different from other. They were prohibited to take part in rituals related to marriage, pregnancy. Their life became colourless. In benars they live in a group. They can understand each other very well. They participate in every festival like holy, Janmashtami etc. They miss their family members but they get another family here.

#### **Problems and recommendation:**

**Problems:** They need financial help from govt. Destitutes widows need permanent shelter.

Govt. should enact the rule to secure their rights. Every widow must get the facilities of widow pension.

**Recommendations:** widows are depicted as victims of their marital status of society. Their economic problem is much worse than their emotional one. We must stand by them in their problems. Govt. should ensure them proper fooding and accommodation facilities.

**Conclusion:** Class wise the problems and lifestyle of widows are different. They have to face different problems. The widows of higher class have to face the problems of mobility due to their illness while the widows of middle class are facing the problem of insecurity. The lower class widows are living in a degradable condition without proper shelter. All of them try to adjust with their condition. They are ordinary women with an extraordinary hearts which can wish happy and prosperous life for their irresponsible, cruel, children.

**Acknowledgement:** I want to express my thanks to my guide honourable professor Nilanjana Das for her guidance to complete my work. I am grateful to my friends who helped me in my field work.

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