The Forgotten Widows of Vrindavan in India

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at some of the issues of old women in India with a special focus on widows in the city of Vrindavan. In India, social mores inhibit women from re-marrying, resulting in an increased likelihood of women ending up alone. In many conservative Indian Hindu families, widows are shunned because they’re seen as bringing bad luck. Most of these widows find refuge in Vrindavan. The data for this study was collected through interviews with 50 widows and two group discussions in the six homes (ashrams) for the widows. Data was collected pertaining to their age, literacy, socio-economic background, marriage, life after marriage, work, experiences of widowhood, and their stay in Vrindavan. The chapter concludes by stating that very little information is available on these widows. There is a need for better data collection and research on the inheritance practices, socio-economic and cultural status of widows, as widows are left out of many schemes and policies of the government. These widows need to be treated as human beings and brought to the mainstream of the women’s movement.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper looks at some of the issues of the old women in India, with a special focus on widows who are in the city of Vrindavan. The data for this study was collected through a structured and unstructured interview in the month of November and December in 2015, with 50 widows and two group discussions consisting of 80 widows in the first group and 60 widows in the second group, in the six homes (ashrams), for the widows in Vrindavan. Of these homes, four were private (Maitri Ghar, Ma Sharda Mahila Ashraya Sadan, Sri Bhagwan bhajan Ashram, Ma dham) and the two run by Government named, Chaitanya Vihar, Phase one and Chaitanya Vihar, Phase two. In depth unstructured interviews were conducted to gather the life stories of women. Data was collected pertaining to their age, literacy, socio-economic background, marriage, life after marriage, work, experience of widowhood and their stay in Vrindavan.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-4772-3.ch015
A category of Indian women that have a unique position is the widows and attitude towards them reflect the paradoxical stand on women. A culture which emphasises on the married status and as a nation deeply entrenched in patriarchal ideologies as far as women are concerned, a widowed woman poses a threat to the social organization and is to be stayed away from, at all costs. On one hand, women are venerated as goddesses and considered as the source of the creative feminine power that holds the authority to construct or destruct the universe. On the other, they are labelled as evil, entrance to hell and a bad influence which should be stayed away from. A woman in the Indian culture is seen as property and is not seen as a successful woman unless she has a son and runs her household well and keeps her husband healthy. When her husband dies she loses her identity and dignity for she has been taught from a young age that she is nothing without her husband and therefore responds as if she is useless when she is widowed and becomes a non-being.

Women face prejudices nor only for being women but also for being old. The predicament of elderly women is aggravated by a life time of gender-based discrimination. It is a well-known fact that two of the most populous nations in the world, India and China contribute nearly 38% of the global elderly population. With the advancement in medical sciences and good health care facilities has brought about a change in the number of people surviving up to a very old age. In 2009, there were 88 million elderly people in India. By 2050, this figure is expected to soar over 320 million. Investment in the elderly population is no longer a question of choice. By 2050, women over 60 years would exceed the number of elderly men by 18.4 million, which would result in a unique characteristic of ‘feminisation’ of the elderly population in India. Improved life expectancy has contributed to an increase in the number of persons 60+ from only 12 million persons 60+ in India in 1901, the number crossed 20 million in 1951 and 57million in 1991. Population projections for 1996-2016 made by the Technical Group on Population Projections (1996) indicate that the 100 million mark is expected to be reached in 2013. Projections beyond 2016 made by the United Nations has indicated that India will have 198 million persons 60+ in 2030 and 326 million in 2050. The percentage of persons 60+ in the total population has seen a steady rise from 5.1 per cent in 1901 to 6.8 per cent in 1991. It is expected to reach 8.9 per cent in 2016. The National Policy on Older Persons was announced by the Government of India in the year 1999. It was a step in the right direction in pursuance of the UN General Assembly Resolution 47/5 to observe 1999 as International Year of Older Persons and in keeping with the assurances to older persons contained in the Constitution. The well-being of senior citizens is mandated in the Constitution of India under Article 41, which provides the right to work, to education and to public assistance in certain cases. It states that the State shall, within the limits of economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement, and in other cases of undeserved want. However, these provision are included in the Chapter IV i.e., Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution. The Directive Principles, as stated in Article 37, are not enforceable by any court of law but these impose positive obligations on the state, i.e., what it should do. The Directive Principles have been declared to be fundamental in the governance of the country and the state has been placed under an obligation to apply them in making laws. The courts however cannot enforce a Directive Principle as it does not create any justiciable right in favour of any individual. The Right to Equality is guaranteed by the Constitution as a fundamental right. Social security is the concurrent responsibility of the central and state governments. (Report National Policy for senior Citizens, 2011). It is most unfortunate that state has not made even a single Act which are directly related to the elderly persons.
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