

**SUMMARY REPORT OF
THE SITUATION ANALYSIS OF WIDOWS IN
RELIGIOUS PLACES OF WEST BENGAL**

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FOREWORD

Widowhood in India is a complex institution fraught with contradictions in meaning and practice. Clearly, the lives of many widows in India do not conform to the projected ideals of widowhood. In the Indian society, particularly among the Bengalis, widowhood is a factor, which serves to isolate a particular section of women from the mainstream of life and with age, their condition deteriorates. There are numerous factors, which influence the stressful nature of the transition to widowhood, including the ego-strength of the survivor, the nature of previous relationships, availability of support from others, health facilities, loss of income and anticipated loneliness. To add to their plight, restrictions are imposed upon their food and clothing habits, participation in social functions and remarriage is prohibited for them. Perhaps more than any other social institution in India, widowhood exposes the gap between cultural and social realities, between precept and practice. It would also be pertinent to note that cutting across caste-creed-religious and to some extent economic identity, the role of a woman in our country is to play the role of a vassal to her male counterpart and the loss of this index of her socio-cultural identity has much more wider ramification than losing a husband which of course is accompanied with the subsequent trauma. In other words, the lack of empowerment of women particularly in the rural areas, total economic dependency on another individual, the stigma associated with a widow as well as social barriers for remarriage especially for the upper caste (although widow re-marriage has greatly increased in recent years) have made the position of widow particularly vulnerable in Indian society.

Apart from human rights issues, there are other consequences of widowhood one of which is migration. Many widows in rural areas, unable to cultivate the land or manage the crop without male assistance and often in debt after incurring the medical expenses of the dead husbands are forced to migrate to towns in search of livelihood. In many cases, this migration is fraught with risks of trafficking, physical and sexual assaults etc and many young widows end up in the brothels.

The condition of widows in West Bengal is no better than rest of India where a significant number of widows are neglected and marginalized. A number of them come to the holy towns of Nabadwip, Tarapith, etc or in the precincts of the temples like Kalighat and Dakshineswar in Kolkata or the numerous 'Mazaars' (graveyard of Sufi saints) dotting the state where free food is regularly served.

Given all these factors, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Govt. of India commissioned the study on 'Situation of Widows in Religious Places in West Bengal' to collect detail information on living conditions as well as their

social, economic, emotional and financial needs for consolidating its strategic interventions for a better for the widows in the country. The objective of the study is to document the abysmal and cruel life of the widows in the religious places and towns of West Bengal and develop a long-term strategy and perspective plan to address their sufferings.

On behalf of Jayaprakash Institute of Social Change, I extend my sincerest thanks to the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Govt. of India, for giving responsibility to the Institute to undertake the research in such an area which is not only agonising but also largely hidden from the public eye. We convey our sincere thanks to the officials of various religious places for devoting their valuable time and giving vital information on lives of the widows living in these places. We express thanks and gratitude to the members of CBOs like Marwari Relief Society, Goudbari Math, Tarapith Mandir Estate etc for sharing their valuable inputs relating to widow's situation in their respective area of work. Last but not the least, few words need to be devoted to the widows of all the Ashrams who remained the main driving force of the entire study.

We sincerely hope that this document will become an important resource material for all organizations that provide basic services for better care and rehabilitation of the widows. Our effort would only become successful if the findings of the study can contribute in way for devising a policy for action for a better future of the widows living in religious places.

Date: 3rd Aug, 2009
Place: Kolkata

(Dr. P. Sen)
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction:

The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. If on one hand she is at the peak of ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members. As compared with past women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way. Their path is full of roadblocks. The women have left the secured domain of their home and are now in the battlefield of life, fully armored with their talent. They had proven themselves. But in India they are yet to get their dues. The sex ratio of India shows that the Indian society is still prejudiced against female. There are 933 females per thousand males in India according to the census of 2001, which is much below the world average of 990 females. There are many problems which women in India have to go through daily. These problems have become the part and parcel of life of Indian women and some of them have accepted them as their fate. The following table illustrates the position of women in Indian society:

Social Indicator	India	World
Infant Mortality Rate, per 1000 live births	73	60
Maternal Mortality Rate, per 100,000 live births	570	430
Female Literacy, %	58	77.6
Female School Enrollment	47	62
Earned Income by females, %	26	58
Underweight Children, %	53	30
Total Fertility Rate	3.2	2.9
Contraception usage, %	44	56
Low birth weight babies, %	33	17

(Maps of India: Indian Women)

Women and girl children suffer from gender discrimination in the allocation of resources within the household, in spite of their considerable labour and often cash contributions. This discrimination is particularly marked in the allocation of food and health care resources, resulting in imbalances in the sex ratio for most of the states particularly in the north and west. The relationship between household wealth and income and gender discrimination is not straightforward;

there is some evidence that in the Indian context, gender discrimination within the household may be less in poor than well-off households. In situations of upward mobility, women often see less of the benefits than men and gender discrimination certainly does not disappear in better-off households; in fact it may intensify. In general, where women's productive work is not visible, has little or no reproductive value or where gender differentials in earnings are high, they become particularly prone to discrimination in the household.

The relationship between female headship and poverty is not clear and there is considerable debate over the definition of female headship. In India, female headed-households tend to be concentrated in the lowest expenditure classes and among cultivating households, they own smaller than average plots of land. They are also over-represented among casual labourers. At the same time the average size of female-headed households is smaller than households overall, in most cases due to the absence of a male spouse. Official estimates put the incidence of female headship at around ten percent, but the actual incidence may be considerable higher, possibly as high as 30 percent, especially in rural areas, where rural-urban migration of males may be a significant contributing factor (DFID report, 1995). The proportion of female-headed households increases in older age groups and the majority of them are widowed, divorced or separated. The process through which female headship arises is important in terms of what forms of social support are available for widows to head the family and be a key part of the decision making process which symbolizes their extent of empowerment. India being a multi religious, multi ethnic and multi cultural society, the extent of social support and living arrangements for such women varies considerably across social groups or communities. In general, a more nuanced picture of the processes which embeds a woman in societal trajectory would assist in identifying the sub-groups of women who face extreme hardship and discrimination in the society.

1.2 Background of the Study:

Status of women in any society is the outcome of prevailing socio-economic factors and cultural milieu. Factors like 'education', 'health', 'real income' etc outline the objective world while traditional beliefs and practices which conjure up the culture of a particular caste/creed/religion make up the subjective world. Status of woman in any society needs to be looked into an admixture of both objective and subjective realities. Thus a woman's access to basic necessities of life, like food, clothing and shelter, status in the family in various stages of life, relationship with other social institutions determines her position in the society. In order to study the status of a woman in a particular social setup, there needs to be a comprehensive understanding of her value perceived by the society in terms of production as well as reproduction. A woman's role in a society greatly

depends on her ability to take decisions about herself (in other words, her extent of self-empowerment) as well as on behalf of the others in her social niche. In Indian society, which is overwhelmingly patriarchal except a few tribes and races of northern and north-eastern India, a woman is construed as a property of her husband and has little or no access to the decision making process. Manu Sanhita, the textbook of Hindu doctrine says a woman has no independence (*na striyam svatantratam arhati*) and should be worshipped as one who illuminates and helps prosper a household (*pujarha grihadeepti*). While the laws of Manu are no longer relevant in modern Indian society, the concept that the a woman is a property of her father at child age, husband and in-laws at young age and sons and other male family members at old age is still very much a determining force in India's social fabric especially in the traditional and rural households. The gender exploitation has assumed a more complicated dimension with the drastic change in socio-economic environment of the country in the past few decades. Thus the class and caste forms and carefully constructed socio-cultural roles that are supposed to be played by women have got new meanings and identities. The status of a widow in an Indian society needs to be analyzed in this light. It would also be pertinent to note that cutting across caste-creed-religious and to some extent economic identity, the role of a woman in our country is to play the role of a vassal to her male counterpart and the loss of this index of her socio-cultural identity has much more wider ramification than losing a husband which of course is accompanied with the subsequent trauma. In other words, the lack of empowerment of women particularly in the rural areas, total economic dependency on another individual, the stigma associated with a widow as well as social barriers for remarriage especially for the upper caste (although widow re-marriage has greatly increased in recent years) have made the position of widow particularly vulnerable in Indian society.

Institution	Women	Men
Remarriage	Widow remarriage difficult, almost impossible in case of elderly women and widows with children	Widowers are encouraged to remarry, do remarry easily
Patrilocality	Widowed daughter-in-law persuaded or compelled to forego the rights on property and return to parents home	Men retain the right to reside at and enjoy the parental property
Widowhood	Widows given secondary status, ill-treated on socio-cultural and religious occasions	Status of widowers unaffected
Joint Family	Rights of women circumvented, widows deprived of their legitimate share	Elder brothers and males benefited at the expense of younger ones and women.

Depicting the Effect of Patriarchy (Source: Status of Widows of Vrindavan & Varanasi, Mohini Giri)

1.3 Aging of Women:

The phenomenon of aging is a biological process but has its psycho-social impact as well.

Generally speaking, old Age had never been a great problem for a traditional Indian society where a value based, joint family system was supposed to prevail. Indian culture is automatically respectful and supportive of elders whom the younger generation respected as repertoire of knowledge and wisdom. With that background, elder abuse was never been considered as a problem in India and was always construed as a western problem. However Sen & Drèze have pointed out that the place of widow in a patriarchal society like India has always been derogatory (India, 2001). Nonetheless, the coping capacities of the younger and older family members are now being challenged and more often than not there is unwanted behaviour by the younger family members, which is experienced as abnormal by the older family member. This behavioural change of the younger generation could be attributed to a gamut of factors like change in living style, fragmentation in the society, erosion of traditional values, industrialization and subsequent work related pressure and rural-urban migration etc.

Almost eight out of 10 elder people in India live in rural areas (Bhat & Dhruvarajan, 2001). The nature and extent of the social and economic pressures operating in the rural areas especially a person's relationship with land has a direct bearing on intra-family relationship or in other words between the younger and the elder generation (Bhat & Dhruvarajan, 2001). The pschyo-social impact of ageing is now being witnessed more poignantly amongst the elders of the country than a few decades ago. Although, both men and women are suffering, the widows are suffering the worst as the latter is the meeting point of the problems faced by a woman, a widow and all these problems accentuated by the problem of aging.

1.4 Dependency ratio

The vast majority of the elderly do not have any independent means of support except for those who had a pensionable job during their working life. Those who are involved in agriculture or casual wage labour have access to income only during their working life. Once they cease working, they become totally dependent on their children or relatives for support. As a result, elderly men and women continue to work much beyond what is normally regarded as the working ages.

In 1981, while the work participation rate for men above the age of 60 was as high as 43 per cent, only 7 per cent of the women were engaged in work. Of course, recorded work participation among women was considerably lower than among men even at younger ages. Thus, for the age group 40-49 years, the work

participation of women was only 27 per cent compared with men's 88 per cent in 1981. The drop in women's work participation at age 60+ is considerably more pronounced than for men. This clearly has implications with regard to the considerably higher dependency of elderly women in comparison with elderly men. (Source: Asia-Pacific Population Journal Vol. 8 No. 1 (1993, pp. 53-63)

In economics, the dependency ratio is an age-population ratio of those typically not in the labor force (the dependent part) and those typically in the labor force (the productive part). In published international statistics, the dependent part usually includes those under the age of 15 and over the age of 64. The productive part makes up the population in between, ages 15 - 64. It is normally expressed as a percentage.

Aged Dependency Ratio may be defined as

$$\text{Aged dependency ratio} = \frac{\text{number of people aged 65 and over}}{\text{number of people aged 15 - 64}} \times 100$$

There are a number of different ways of looking at the extent to which elderly people become dependent on society. The following table illustrates the Age Dependency Ratio in our country which is incrementally increasing in both urban as well as rural areas in the past few decades.

Table 12.29 : Old Age Dependency Ratio by Sex and Residence in India in 1981, 1991 & 2001									
Area	Old Age Dependency Ratio ^j *								
	Male			Female			Persons		
	1981	1991	2001	1981	1991	2001	1981	1991	2001
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Rural	13.1	13.3	13.6	12.9	13.0	14.6	13.0	13.2	14.1
Urban	8.5	9.2	9.9	10.1	10.2	11.7	9.2	9.7	10.7
Combined	11.8	12.2	12.4	12.2	12.2	13.8	12.0	12.2	13.1
Note	1. All India excludes Assam for 1981 and Jammu & Kashmir for 1991 2. 2001 figure excludes the population of paomata MaoMaham and Purul division of Manipur State (*) Old Age Dependency Ratio is the number of Persons in the Old Age group 60+ per 100 persons the age group 15-59								
Source	Report and Tables on Age, Census of India, 2001, Registrar General of India, New Delhi. 1981 & 1991: Population from Social and Cultural Tables, 1981 and 1991 respectively. Registrar General of India, Govt. of India, New Delhi								

Source: Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Govt. of India

There is an interesting correlation between Dependency Ratio and Bereavement Statistics. Social statistics shows that with the increase in longevity a child born nowadays can expect to live upto 80 years whereas a child born 100 years ago could have expected to live only upto 30 years of age (Reddy, 1999). Thus with an increasingly graying population, it was seen that a sizable number of the women aged 65 years and above were widows (Reddy, 1999). According to the 1991 census, there were approximately 33 million widows which i.e. 8% of the widow population, or 50% of the female population which was above 50 years of age. The census figure shows that incidence of widowhood in India is the highest in the world. The probable reasons behind it are:

- Longevity of women has contributed to this phenomenon since an Indian woman who survives till old age is almost destined to become widow. This is because 64% of those who were past 60 years of age and 80% of those who were past 70 years of age had become widows. In contrast, 2.5% of the males were widowers which may be attributed to re-marriage and higher mortality.
- Internal strife in states like Jammu & Kashmir, Assam and other north eastern states etc where men are target groups contributes to the factor.
- Another factor albeit minor could be the high rate of suicide by farmers in many parts of the country like Vidarbha, Andhra Pradesh etc. Although National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data confirm an appalling 1.5 lakh farm suicides between 1997 and 2005, the figure is probably much higher.
- Rampant female foeticide resulting in skewed male: female ratio i.e. lesser number of female in the population automatically pushes up the mathematical calculation of widowhood rate.

1.5 Widowhood in India:

Widowhood in India is a complex institution fraught with contradictions in meaning and practice. Clearly, the lives of many widows in India do not conform to the projected ideals of widowhood. Equally clearly, the ideals of widowhood have been redefined over time and place. In the Indian society, particularly among the Bengalis, widowhood is a factor, which serves to isolate a particular section of women from the mainstream of life and with age, their condition deteriorates. There are numerous factors, which influence the stressful nature of the transition to widowhood, including the ego-strength of the survivor, the nature of previous relationships, availability of support from others, health facilities, loss of income and anticipated loneliness. To add to their plight, restrictions are imposed upon their food and clothing habits, participation in social functions and remarriage is prohibited for them. Perhaps more than any other social institution in India, widowhood exposes the gap between cultural

and social realities, between precept and practice. To begin with, nearly 10 percent of all women and 55 percent of women over fifty years are widows: this social reality undermines the projected ideal that all women should remain devoted chaste wives.

Recognizing the presence of widows in society, the orthodox Hindu lawmakers formulated a set of rights as well as duties for the Hindu widows. In principle, a widow is entitled to share of her late husband's property or to maintenance by his extended family. In return, the duty of the widow is to uphold the propriety – the honour and purity – of the husband's family and lineage. If her husband's extended family fails to support her, a widow has certain residual rights in her natal home.

In real life, the duties of widows are more widely enforced than the rights of the widows are honoured. This is so for a variety of reasons but mainly because the rights of widows are contingent on the duties or obligations of others, mainly male kin, which they cannot enforce. Stories abound of brothers-in-law who usurp the widow's share of property and do not offer her a harvest share or daily maintenance; of sons who live separately and do not support their widowed mother; and of brothers who do not support their widowed sister although, they inherited her share of their father's property. Ultimately, the treatment a widow receives is the outcome of a mix of duty, affection and authority. But only widow who control property or earn independent incomes command real authority. However, many widows do not control property or earn an independent income.

Let us now illuminate the everyday reality of Hindu widows in rural India through the lens of the cultural ideals surrounding widowhood, and vice versa. The link between cultural ideals and social reality – between ideology and practice – are the marriage, kinship and caste systems, which organize and structure women's daily lives. In very real everyday ways, these institutions and the underlying ideology of gender relations interact to restrict the capacity of widows to make individual choices and to take individual actions. These restrictions often have dire consequences for widows and their children, both those who manage on their own and those who live as unwanted dependents. The widows live lives of enforced asceticism, prayer and abstinence. Lord Krishna whose play with the *Gopinis* of Vrindavan is treated in Vaishnava philosophy as unison of *Jeevatma* (mortal) and *Paramatma* (divine) and who is worshipped in Hindu religion as the perfect and ever-encompassing divine male figure (*Purushottam*) and protector of *Dharma* represents the call of the divine for the individual souls. As the Bhakti movement spread, *Radha* became the inspiration for supreme devotion to Lord Krishna with the popularization of the epic *Geet Govindam*. For the widows, in absence of their husband, the patriarchal society asked them to worship Lord Krishna as their divine husband. Perhaps

this could be a key historical reason for which Vrindavan, the holiest site for the Vaishnavas for being the birthplace of Lord Krishna emerged as the most popular destination of the widows all over India. Vrindavan occupies a special position in a Bengali Hindu's heart since the days the Bengali Vaishnavite mystic, Sri Chaitanya Maha Prabhu, who in 1515, more or less founded the town of Vrindavan by reclaiming it from wilderness. Later Vrindavan was dotted with Krishna temples and for generations, widows have made a pilgrimage to Vrindavan. It is another story that a substantial number of them are either admonished by the families of their former husbands or are literally dropped off by relatives that no longer want them.

Moving from theosophy to the practical issues being confronted by the widows, briefly speaking, the following basic problems could be witnessed in the life of an aging woman/widow:

- **Medical Issues:** With advancing age, women go through menopause and attendant health issues such as a higher likelihood of osteoporosis, but few Indian medical college syllabi pay enough attention to Geriatrics. In addition, there is lack of home-based health care and assisted living and hospital care for elderly women who are poor and marginalized. The reproductive and sexual health of the widows are extremely neglected and considered a taboo. Even in case of non-consensual sex (mostly by the in-laws and other family members), the blame is squarely put on the widow.
- **Economic/Financial issues:** The widows have to face many kinds of deprivation: economic, social, cultural and emotional. Of all the deprivation the economic deprivation is the most harmful. Earlier researches show that household headed by widows suffer dramatic decline in per capita income and that the mortality risk of widowhood was higher for women than men. Among basic causes of their vulnerability are restrictions on the residence, inheritance, remarriage and employment opportunities of widows. With women living longer, they are more likely to outlive their husbands. A bulk of these women does not have training and assistance to manage their financial affairs independently like pension and other savings of the husbands. The situation is grimmer for the women in the unorganized sector where basically 95% of Indian population live. With little or no saving, no steady stream of income, the poor women live at the mercy of other members of the family.
- **Social & Psychological Issues:** As urban Indians move to a nuclear family structure, the age-old support systems that sustained the older generation are being dismantled while new social structures are not yet widow

friendly. Schemes like Widow Pension Schemes and National Old Age Pension Scheme are inadequate compared to the demand on ground. Psychological issue is routinely faced even by the widows of the so-called higher echelons of the society. Till date widows are accused of being 'responsible' for the death of their husband and described as the curse of the family. They are forced to obey restrictive dress code and behaviour and have bland food, observe fasting on particular days etc. These practices are mainly observed by the widows belonging to higher caste.

- Legal Issues: Unaware of her rights (especially under Hindu Succession Act, 1956) and incapable of asserting herself, a woman has no recourse to judicial help. Chen (1994) reported 30% of the widows suffered serious and sometimes violent conflicts over inheritance, movable and immovable assets etc. They are often cheated by their in-laws and near and dear ones.

Apart from human rights issues, there are other consequences of widowhood one of which is migration. Many widows in rural areas, unable to cultivate the land or manage the crop without male assistance and often in debt after incurring the medical expenses of the dead husbands are forced to migrate to towns in search of livelihood. In many cases, this migration is fraught with risks of trafficking, physical and sexual assaults etc and many young widows end up in the brothels. One study found that inheritance laws often served to entrap women. Their husbands'/families, intent on preventing division of land and homes, frequently forced them to remarry back into the family (which has been reported mostly from north India). The traditional custom which means a daughter to be another's property (*paraya dhan*) meant that many Hindu girls are twice blighted. Parents eager to unburden themselves of a daughter arrange a childhood marriage, and widowhood leaves the woman unwanted again with no taker for her in either ancestral or paternal homes. One widow once told a New York Times respondent, "*It was terrible working all those years as my mother-in-law's servant,*" she said. "*But here in Vrindavan, things are much better. All around, there are cries of 'Krishna! Krishna!' and that makes me feel as though I belong.*" (Burns, NYT, 1998)

The status of Muslim widows in India needs also be taken into reckoning. Muslim population in India is second largest in the world, more than that of Pakistan. Islam permits remarriage of widows and a widow can remarry after 'Iddat' (a specific time period) which varies according to schools of thought. Yet Muslim widows of the sub-continent are an exploited lot, their vulnerability stemming from the traditional patriarchal family system. In the strife torn state of Kashmir (which incidentally is India's only Muslim majority state), probably every mohallah, every lane and by-lane is livid with the sordid tales of the widows whose husbands were killed during terrorist attacks, cross-fires and military operations. A large number of these widows are quite young, some may

have barely commensurate their marriage. According to Dr. Hamida Naveem (PUCL report, 2002), *"Conventionality places chains on a widow's personal liberty; she loses the freedom to interact with males as she is held in suspicion. Though she is not an outcaste, yet the "sin" of being a young widow follows her everywhere. She is not normally accepted in marriage because of social stigma attached to her widowhood. It was an albatross round her neck, as if she was an accused. The condition of those who became a widow within a few days of marriage or before the consummation of marriage, is much more heart rending as the force of social stigmas is so strong that they cannot get re-married to the right persons but, at the most, could be thrust on some unwilling or undeserving man to support her. In border areas like Baramullah young widows have been given in marriage to men who are old enough to be their father and who already have many children by their first wife. Widows with children are hardly accepted in marriage and alas this happens in a society of Muslims whose Prophet had married mostly widows and divorcees to set an example for his followers and instructed them time and again to be kind to orphans in word and deed and to give a respectful place to widows by preferring to marry them."*

As far as the ground situation today goes, a Muslim widow's status in the society defrauds her of many elements of empowerment. A Muslim woman's right to inheritance is observed more in breach than in compliance. In most of the cases, daughters are not given their due share in father's property. What generally is practiced is that the brothers give her a token amount as 'generous gift' and insist that she will not claim for her lawful share in father's property. The paradox lies here. The sister hardly goes in for litigation against the brother(s) for fear of losing a cordial familial relationship. Maintaining such relationships is always the responsibility of the 'weaker' party (read sex). She, however, claims her share in crisis moments or in cases when the husband demands dowry, and approaches her brothers. It is only the sweet will of the brothers that they allocate a little share to the helpless sister as of 'mercy'! In the case of widows, it is harder and sometimes impossible to claim their lawful property rights when they are without any adult male to provide them the social, moral, and economic support. Thus widows lose their right to property and land, even when a proper application of the law would have protected them. Widows at a time of loss and grief are vulnerable and cannot counter traditional barriers to seek legal help outside the family. Earlier study on Muslim widow in Delhi by PUCL (2002) highlighted their miserable living conditions, individual compromises with them and the bleak future of the families. A widow and her family were always under observation and lived in an atmosphere of suspicion and the overall observation of the study was neglected, deprived, and frustrated, with droplets of aid from the state, the Muslim widows of Delhi have been condemned to a life of penury. Similar condition of Muslim widows has been seen elsewhere in the country. To summarize, irrespective of caste, creed or religion, being a widow for a poor in India is to suffer a "social death."

1.6 Magnitude of the Problem:

The 1981 census reported 25.9 million widows in the country. 78.73 per cent of these were in the rural areas. A majority were above 50 years of age. In absolute numbers, in 1981, there were 13 lakh widows below 35 years of age. The National Committee on the status of Women (1971-74) stated that government estimates that about one lakh women in the 20-44 age-group become destitute every year. According to Mahishi (1988) this estimate is much below the actual numbers. Whatever their age, there are formidable social barriers to the remarriage of Hindu widows. They are condemned to live cold, deprived and unfulfilled lives in either their parents' or husband's homes, vulnerable always to sexual exploitation, or in religious towns such as Vrindavan and Varanasi.

According to the 1991 Census of India, there are 33 million widows in the country. This is eight percent of the total female population, or one out of every 13 women. A significant number lives in towns of religious importance like Vrindaban, Varanasi, Mathura, Haridwar and Puri. These towns are also homes to many destitute women. The continuing exodus of widows to these places have often been explained away as their search for "Moksha" (Salvation). But the truth is very different. The widows live out the rest of their lives in oppressive conditions, dependent mainly on begging, the singing of *bhajans* and other occupations for survival.

Incidence of Widowhood in Different Age Groups in Rural India, 1981

Age Group	As percentage of Rural Females
0-9	0.0 (0.0)
10-14	00.3(0.03)
15-19	0.2 (0.1)
20-24	0.7(0.5)
25-29	1.6 (1.0)
30-34	3.2(1.6)
35-39	5.5(2.3)
40-44	10.8(3.8)
45-49	15.5(5.0)
50-54	29.4 (8.0)
55-59	30.5 (9.8)
60-64	55.6 (14.9)
65-69	57.6 (17.6)
70+	77.2 (27.6)
All ages	82 (2.7)

Source: Martha Chen & Jean Dreze

A West Bengal government sponsored survey on widows in Vrindavan (Malini Bhattacharya, 2003), found that there were less "visible institutions" apart from those providing a religious refuge to destitute women, which seemed to pursue trades that are illegal and exploitative. The "sevadasi" 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. Over 50 per cent of those examined depend on bhajan ashrams and begging for their livelihood. Some of the widows are too old to even cook for themselves. The only bedding they have are pieces of jute sacks. Even after death, there is no institutional support for having their bodies cremated. Medical help depends on charity and is virtually non-existent. The report observed that *"piety is not just a plea but a very strong and real motivation in the majority of cases, particularly among the older women, for staying in Vrindavan."* Life in Vrindavan, though distressed, seemed to hold a sense a dignity and freedom to them than the marginalised existence in their families. Observing a large number of young widows (both Bengali as well as non-Bengali), in modern Bhajan Ashrams, The study also observed 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. Earlier studies by Mohini Giri et al pointed out to the rampant sexual exploitation of the young widows of Vrindavan. In a co-sponsored 2002 study titled, "Status of Widows of Vrindavan and Varanasi" by The Guild of Service and The National Commission for Women India, it was found that; of all elderly widows in Vrindavan, aged 70 and older, an astonishing 41.5% of all elderly widows live under extreme harsh conditions on the streets of Vrindavan without the support of any dwelling. In view of the above, the West Bengal Govt. sponsored survey recommended among other things, a widow pension, a joint investigation by the Government of UP and West Bengal regarding trafficking of women and acquisition of "disused" property of Bengali landowners and setting up of old-age homes.

Many millions of widows may be left out of the ambit of census because of their homelessness, frequenting between various households, or living as a part of a dynamic population on the streets of major cities and places of worship. So many are the deprivations that a widow faces, that the mortality rate for widows is a shocking 85 percent higher than it is for married women. India has amongst the highest prevalence of widowhood in the world. The incidence of widowhood rises sharply with age: 64 percent among women aged 60 and above, and 80 percent among women aged 70. A sample survey revealed that though 88 percent of widows remain in their deceased husband's village, less than 3 percent are allowed to stay in the same house. The others are either abandoned, often by their own sons to appropriate the father's property, or sent back to their parents' houses. (Sachdev, 2001)

The plight of the widows only reflect the dichotomy of the Indian society where on the one side there is an ultra modern society where women groomed in western education and ideology occupy prestigious positions in the society and on the other hand a section which is deprived and live in wretched conditions.

1.7 Widows of West Bengal:

The condition of widows in West Bengal is no better than rest of India where a significant number of widows are neglected and marginalized. A number of them come to the holy towns of Nabadwip, Tarapith, etc or in the precincts of the temples like Kalighat and Dakshineswar in Kolkata or the numerous mazaars (graveyard of Sufi saints) dotting the state where free food is regularly served.

Age group		Widowed			
		Male		Female	
		1981	1991	1981	1991
15-19	West Bengal	0.00	0.03	0.03	0.2
	India	0.09	0.07	0.02	0.18
20-29	West Bengal	0.2	0.2	1.5	1.1
	India	0.6	0.5	1.1	0.9
30-49	West Bengal	1.4	0.9	11.1	7.5
	India	2.3	1.8	8.0	5.6
50-69	West Bengal	7.0	5.7	52.3	43.1
	India	10.2	8.4	35.4	32.4
70+	West Bengal	19.4	15.0	84.4	75.4
	India	27.1	21.4	77.6	67.2

%Distribution of Male/Female Population by Widowed Status (Source Census Data)

The above table shows that a woman's conjugal status changes more rapidly when they reach the age group of 50-69 years. In 1991, approximately 43% of the women in the age group of 50-69 years were widows. A pertinent data which emerges is that the percentage of widows in the population in all age categories is much higher in West Bengal than rest of India. Thus while media had been successful to occasionally highlight the plight of widows in the holy cities of Benares and Mathura or the temple town of Nabadwip where of course a large number of widows flock for the last days of their sustenance, the inconspicuous yet heart rending story of deprivation of the widows who have been enmeshed in the sea of humanity named India or its respective states like West Bengal lies unheard and unsung.

District		Married (%)			Widowed (%)			Divorced/Separated (%)		
		(60-69)	(70-79)	(80+)	(60-69)	(70-79)	(80+)	(60-69)	(70-79)	(80+)
Koch Bihar	Male	86.8	80.6	61.8	10.6	16.8	18.5	0.6	0.7	0.4
	Female	31.0	19.6	18.7	67.7	78.6	69.0	0.6	0.5	0.5
Jalpaiguri	Male	82.9	75.6	64.8	14.3	19.8	25.0	0.5	0.8	1.5
	Female	40.2	24.7	22.7	58.8	74.0	69.0	0.4	0.3	0.9
Durjeeling	Male	82.4	71.4	55.7	13.6	23.7	24.4	0.7	0.3	0.3
	Female	52.7	32.2	21.0	44.0	65.1	69.7	1.0	0.4	0.3
West Dinajpur	Male	87.0	80.5	60.5	10.1	16.4	20.2	0.4	0.5	0.9
	Female	36.9	23.7	17.3	61.2	74.3	72.2	0.8	0.6	0.7
Maldah	Male	86.0	79.8	50.1	10.6	16.2	13.8	0.4	0.2	0.5
	Female	39.2	21.6	18.0	58.5	74.7	56.1	0.7	0.4	1.0
Murshidabad	Male	91.0	85.2	73.2	6.7	11.9	17.9	0.4	0.4	0.9
	Female	38.9	22.2	20.2	50.6	76.6	75.4	0.7	0.5	1.0
Nadia	Male	89.8	84.0	62.4	7.2	12.5	13.3	0.2	0.1	0.4
	Female	37.8	18.0	14.2	61.0	80.4	75.8	0.5	0.2	0.2
24 Parganas (N)	Male	89.9	83.8	62.6	6.6	12.0	11.5	0.3	0.4	0.3
	Female	43.3	23.7	18.8	55.2	74.8	71.1	0.5	0.6	0.4
24 Parganas (S)	Male	88.8	82.9	59.8	7.6	12.9	11.2	0.4	0.3	0.2
	Female	42.3	24.2	18.9	56.3	73.9	66.4	0.5	0.3	0.2
Calcutta	Male	87.7	83.7	74.2	5.4	10.1	14.4	0.1	0.2	0.1
	Female	49.9	26.2	24.2	47.8	69.6	70.2	0.2	0.3	0.1
Haora	Male	90.3	85.2	61.4	6.0	10.7	13.7	0.1	0.2	0.1
	Female	42.7	23.2	20.1	56.3	75.8	69.0	0.2	0.1	0.1
Hoogli	Male	89.4	84.4	71.2	7.2	12.6	18.3	0.2	0.3	1.0
	Female	40.2	21.2	18.6	58.7	77.1	76.1	0.3	0.5	0.2
Medinipur	Male	89.2	81.6	66.5	8.5	16.1	20.5	0.5	0.3	0.6
	Female	38.0	18.6	12.7	61.1	80.2	82.9	0.5	0.5	0.6
Bankura	Male	85.5	76.0	58.3	11.8	20.3	18.4	0.2	0.2	0.2
	Female	31.2	15.2	13.7	67.9	83.8	73.5	0.2	0.2	-
Purulia	Male	83.5	74.5	58.5	14.9	24.0	32.2	0.5	0.3	2.9
	Female	35.1	18.5	13.5	64.3	81.1	85.8	0.4	0.3	0.2
Bardhaman	Male	88.2	81.3	57.7	8.9	15.3	14.4	0.4	0.2	2.1
	Female	38.2	21.0	19.6	60.6	77.7	68.5	0.4	0.2	0.5
Birbhum	Male	82.8	72.4	49.4	14.3	23.4	12.4	0.5	0.2	0.7
	Female	32.3	15.5	18.7	66.3	81.8	61.8	0.5	0.3	0.6
West Bengal	Male	88.1	81.1	62.7	8.6	14.5	15.8	0.3	0.3	0.7
	Female	39.7	21.7	18.2	59.0	76.7	72.1	0.5	0.4	0.4
India	Male	85.4	77.6	61.7	12.0	19.6	25.4	0.3	0.3	0.5
	Female	52.5	32.7	23.4	46.3	66.1	69.8	0.4	0.4	0.3

District-wise %Distribution of Male/Female Population by Marital Status (Source Census Data, 1991)

1.8 Existing Coping Strategy of Widows:

Employment opportunity for the widows is very less due to their lack of education and skill, lack of productivity due to ageing factors, restrictions on mobility etc. The basic coping mechanism of a widow are as follows:

- Living with in-laws in seclusion, occupied with domestic chores and looking after the children
- Living with adult children
- Moving around the houses of family members like driftwood
- Returning to natal home, where many times they are refused entry

- Sending young children to work and giving away marriage to daughters
- Working from home on a piece-meal rate like sewing, rolling bidis or running small business like rice husking after taking credit from local money-lenders/SHGs/micro finance institutions.
- Migrating to nearest town to beg or seek domestic work
- Seek refuge in Ashrams (especially the elderly and infirm) where they survive from begging, living on doles from the Ashrams and leading as austere impoverished lifestyle.

1.9 Remarriage of Widows:

Contrary to popular belief, widow remarriage although not widespread but nonetheless does take place and is on the rise especially in the urban areas (Mudbidri). Widow remarriage is also relatively more prevalent amongst lower caste. However it needs to be borne in mind that there are great variations depending on state, caste, socio-economic level etc. The higher the caste, the greater may be restrictions on a widow's lifestyle. Thus, a widow from a relatively well off family may be subject to greater cruelty and abuse by in-laws than a SC/ST widow who is freer to work outside and remarry. Effect of Sanskritization of lower caste is a determining factor for remarriage of widows of lower caste. In most other cases, widows are allowed to remarry - including levirate marriages to their brothers-in-law - but often don't choose to, either because of their children, or because a man agreeing to marry a widow is generally impoverished. Other complex local factors too determine the status of widows in a society. Many times it has been seen in Santhal/Munda/Lodha communities that widows are sometimes dubbed as witches and either killed or ostracized from the family (primarily to grab their properties) although widow remarriage has been prevalent amongst them. Nonetheless young widows sometimes do remarry and widow remarriage rate in India may be around 15-20% (Chen, 1994). Dreze and Chen further found out that the percentage of remarried widows again losing their husband is particularly high indicating a large difference between the bride and the groom. Remarried widows especially with children are also not well accepted in their in-laws homes. According to an earlier study by Kitchlu, lesser number of Muslim widows were in favour of remarriage compared to Hindus and Christians (Kitchlu).

1.10 Government Initiatives for Widows & Elderly Women:

Constitutional Provisions

The welfare of the aged has been enshrined in the Constitution of India. The item 9 of the State list and items 20, 23 and 24 of the Concurrent List speak of the provisions of age pension, social security, social insurance, economic and social planning, and relief to the disabled and the unemployed. The Article 41 of the Directive Principles of State Policy expresses “the State shall make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in case of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement, and in other cases undeserved wants, within its limits of economic development and capacity”. Fundamental Right, Article 16 (2) emphasizes on equal opportunity in matters of public employment. Article 47 of the Indian Constitution points out the raising of the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people and improvement of public health.

Legislative Measures

Coming to the category of legislative measure, the retirement benefits (GPF & PPF) as well as gratuity are provided based on respective laws

- The Employees Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952 (amended in 1996) provide for economic security to persons or their families in the event of retirement or even death before retirement.
- The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 to provide for more effective provisions for the maintenance and welfare of parents and senior citizens guaranteed and recognized under the Constitution and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.
- The National Social Assistance Programme came into existence on 15th August 1995 and one of its programmes is the National Old Age Pension Scheme that is implemented through the Panchayats and municipalities. Presently, all State Governments and Union Territories are implementing the old age pension scheme under the State sector.
- The Indira Gandhi Widow Pension scheme provides pensions to widows in the age group of 40-60 years and belonging to BPL category.

One of the main reasons for widow disempowerment is that all property rights are governed by personal laws, which are patriarchal and more or less akin to customary laws. The Hindu Succession Act allows the widow to inherit equally with sons and daughters. But it also has a questionable provision whereby the husband, if he so wishes, can will away all his property, leaving the widow no support (India: 'Women In White', Sachdev, 2001). In theory 51 percent of widows have rights to a share in their husband's land. But these rights are often violated in practice by brothers-in-law.

Family laws	Laws relating to termination of pregnancy	Laws relating to violence against women	Laws relating to property	Laws for working women	Laws for empowerment	Procedural laws
Special Marriages Act (1954)	Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act (1971)	Section 304B and 498A of the Indian Penal Code	West Bengal Land Reforms Act (1955)	Factories Act (1948)	Constitution (73rd) Amendment Act (1992)	The Family Courts Act (1984)
Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956)	Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prevention and Misuse) Act (1994)	Section 376A, 376B, 376C, 376D of the Indian Penal Code	West Bengal Land Reforms Manual	Mines Act	Constitution (74th) Amendment Act (1993)	The Legal Aid Services Authority Act (1987)
Dowry Prohibition Act (1961) (amended in 1984, 1986)		Section 113A, 114A of the Indian Evidence Act		Plantation Labour Act (1951)	West Bengal Panchayat Amendment Act (1993)	The West Bengal State Commission for Women Act (1992)
Section 125-128 of the Criminal Procedure Code 1973				Maternity Benefit Act (1961)	West Bengal Municipal Election Act (1994)	
Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act (1978)				Equal Remuneration Act (1976)		
Muslim Women (Protection of Rights After Divorce) Act (1986)						
Parsi Marriage (Amendment) Act (1988)						
Indian Divorce (Amendment) Act 2001						

Legal Provisions/Institutions for Women in West Bengal/India

Policy Measures

The emergence of National Policy on Older Persons, 1999, a collaborative pursuit of both public and private agencies along with the 'Third Sector', which aims at the well-being of the aged focuses on the areas of financial security, health care and nutrition, shelter, welfare and other needs of the senior citizens and provides protection against abuse and exploitation. Moreover, the National Council for Older Persons on 18th October 2002 and 7th February 2003 emphasizes on the following areas: uniform age of 60+ for extending facilities/benefits to senior citizens; financial security; health care and nutrition needs; food security and shelter; and highlighting the role of media.

CHAPTER II

RATIONALE & METHODOLOGY

2.1 Rationale of the Study:

The roots of the problem of widowhood can be traced to the structure of Indian society. It is predominantly patriarchal in nature, where a woman does not enjoy equal rights with a man. And if her spouse dies, her condition becomes precarious. At every step, her negative status as a widow reinforced. As a widow, she ceases to be part of civilized society and is relegated to the fringes of existence: her hair is sometimes cropped short; she is made to wear just a single white sari for the rest of her life; she is not allowed to eat meat, fish or spices; she is not allowed to be present at some religious or social function; she loses all rights over the property of her dead husband; she is not even allowed to conduct the *kanyadaan* (The marriage ceremony of a daughter) of her own daughter -in short , this is almost like an excommunication, and ostracisation.

Once a widow loses the reproductive role in the family, she is retained to participate in the productive activities of the family at very little cost. In addition, young widows are quite often vulnerable to sexual exploitation by members of the family as well as outsiders. The Bengali Hindu communities have contributed towards the marginalisation of the widows in a unique way. While others excluded widows as individuals within the family and community, Bengali Hindus isolated them as a social category, far from home. They were sent to places of pilgrimage in Varanasi, Vrindaban, Mathura and Nabadweep to live on small monthly allowances.

The widow's journey to these places of pilgrimage were always explained away as religious in nature- "it is her desire to spend the rest of their lives in peace, serving God";" it is her desire to renounce the worldly life and become a *Sadhvi*

(Female devotee)".

With nowhere to go or no one to turn to, widows through these places of pilgrimage, hoping for a better life. Before they can realize their predicament, their troubles begin.

Several attempts have been made by socially conscious people to assess the exact condition of widows living in these religious places and findings have revealed that they were actually compelled to live in deplorable conditions. According to the report of the National Commission for Women (1996) on the condition of widows living in Vrindaban, "Most of these women (widows/destitute women) work as helping hands in households and Ashrams as they are illiterate and do not have any particular skills. The main occupation of most of these destitute women in singing *bhajans and kirtans* in bhajanashrams run by trusts that are funded by rich patrons." **Reports have also pointed out that many of the widows suffer from tuberculosis, asthma and various skin diseases. Owing to filthy living conditions, many women suffer from several ailments. Lack of sanitation also results in stomach ailments like diarrhea and dysentery. Their hair and clothes are full of lice and there are serious cases of STDs.**

A report published by the State Commission for Women, West Bengal, in 1999-2000, says: "It cannot be denied that the extremely fragile physical, mental and financial state in which these women exist makes them exposed to many different kinds of exploitation. The bhajanashrams make profits out of them without providing them with commensurate benefit. In their places of residence, those who control these places not only charge exorbitant rents, but also threaten and bully them continually. To make ends meet, some of them take up menial jobs in the households of the all-powerful *pandas* and are again exploited there....."

Given all these factors, it seems fair to assume that widowhood in India is associated with economic deprivation, social ostracism and cultural sanction. Regrettably, there is limited data on the economic status or well-being of widows. In view of the odds referred to above, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Govt. of India needs detail information on living conditions as well as their social, economic, emotional and financial needs for consolidating its strategic interventions for a better for the widows in the country.

2.2 Objective of the Study:

The objective of the study is to document the abysmal and cruel life of the widows in the religious places and towns of West Bengal and develop a long-term strategy and perspective plan to address their sufferings.

2.3 Specific Objectives:

- To understand the different factors contributing to the migration of widows and destitute women to various religious centers, its pattern and route
- To develop a practical understanding of their present social, economic and health conditions
- To identify a procedure for their rehabilitation, generate public opinion against the practice of ostracism and provide adequate shelters for them
- To understand factors contributing towards discrimination of widows
- To identify a strategy of hope for the voiceless widows

2.4 Methodology & Sample Frame:

Four districts viz. Nadia, Birbhum, Hooghly and Kolkata Metropolitan Area were taken up for study. The locations were identified based on survey of secondary data, Government records etc indicating a significant population of widows in the said religious places. The respondents were selected based on non-probability purposive sampling.

The sample size is as follows:

West Bengal			
Nadia	Birbhum	Hooghly	Kolkata
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nabadwip Dham (n=90) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tarapith (n=30) • Patharchapri Mazar (n=15) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Furfura Sharif (n=10) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dakshineswar/ Adyapith (n= 25) • Kalighat (n=30)

2.5 Collection of Data:

I. Primary Sources

The data for the proposed study was collected in the following way:

- Semi -structured questionnaire based on both quantitative and qualitative matrix on the selected sample of respondents to capture all relevant information about the situation of the widows
- Focus group discussion with the widows, destitute women, etc to secure information about their socio-psychological problems, accessibility to support services, family ties, their own views/expectations about their rehabilitation etc
- Interview with key informants like
 - Officials of Ashrama/bhajanashrams/Mazars
 - Pandas of temples

- Local Club members/NGOs
 - Govt. officials and Police
- iv. Case studies highlighting the socio-economic plight of the widows

The primary data was collected in order to assess the socio-economic condition of the widows, the difficulties being faced by them in terms of livelihood and living conditions, social stigma and ways to address them. Participant observation method was used to understand the living condition of the widows and how and what do they do in eking out their scanty living.

II. Secondary Sources

The secondary data was collected from

- ❖ Reports/ documents available with DWCD/ University Departments/ National and State Commission for Women will be used for desk review.
- ❖ Reports available from Non Government Organizations (NGO)
- ❖ Books and other literature published on the plight of the widows
- ❖ Newspaper clippings

2.6 Time Frame: April 2009 – July 2009

CHAPTER III

INTRODUCTION TO THE SURVEYED AREAS

3. The Surveyed Areas:

The present section gives a brief review of the surveyed areas where a large concentration of widows was observed. There were other places of worship in the state with formidable widow population, but could not be included due to time constraints and other limitations of the study.

3.1 Nabadwip:

Nabadwip is a town and a municipality in Nadia district in the Indian state of West Bengal. Its name means "9 islands" in the Bengali language. The islands are named Antardwip (Sri Mayapur), Simantadwip, Rudradwip, Madhyadwip, Godrumdwip, Ritudwip, Jahnudwip, Modadrumdwip, and Koladwip. It is a place of many lilas (or "pastimes of God" in Hinduism) of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Many pilgrims from origins worldwide adhering to Gaudiya Vaishnavism come to Nabadwip every year on pilgrimage and for festivals like Sri Navadvipa-mandala Parikrama and holidays like Gaura Purnima.

Nabadwip was the capital of Ballal Sen and later Lakshman Sen, the famous rulers of the Sena Empire, who ruled from 1159 to 1206. In 1202, Nabadwip was captured by Bakhtiyar Khilji. This victory paved the way for Muslim rule in Bengal. Nabadwip and Nadia were great centres of learning and intellectual prowess. For five centuries, it was referred to as "Oxford of Bengal". Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533) was born and spent many years at Nabadwip. The Holy Birth Place of Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is known as "Gour Gangar Desh" as well as "Oxford of Bengal". Nabadwip bears the proud heritage for Srichaitanyadeb, Krishnanda Agambagish, Basudeb Sarbobhouma etc. The religious atmosphere of Nabadwip is a combination of Baishnaba, Shakta, Buddha, Saiba due to the aforesaid leaders, Pal Monarchy, Sen Monarchy etc. The main festival of Nabadwip is "Rash Utsav" . It is also known as "Pat Purnima" or "Rash Kali Puja" or "Shakta Rash". The varieties of Baishnaba, Shakta, Saiba Pratima (Idols) attracts every one. The Rash Utsav is like national festival of the inhabitants of Nabadwip. One of the exponents of Sree Nityananda baishnab sect Sree Sree Radharaman Charan Das Deb's Ashram (SamajBari) is located in Nabadwip. The snan jatra utsav of 'Dadamoshai' as he is fondly called as, is celebrated in early March every year.

Nabadwip which is also known as "*Gupta Brindaban*" (hidden Vrindavan) is the most popular destination of the widows and can be aptly described as the 'white rainbow' town of West Bengal. Although nobody knows the exact figure but

there could be around 1200-1300 widows in the town which shoots up during festivals like Rash Jatra. There is a residential accommodation for 10 destitute widows in Nabadwip Bhajanashram which was established in 1919 on the line of Bhajanshrams of Vrindavan. According to Mr Biswanath Chowdhry of Nabadwip Bhajanashram, around 600-700 widows come to the Ashram daily to have their mid-day meals. After four hours of continuous singing in the morning, the women are served a spartan lunch of rice, lentils and a vegetable curry. They are also sometimes provided with clothes, blankets etc by the devotees who come to this place and occasional medical camps are also held. Some other Ashrams/Gaudiya Maths also offer residential homes to the widows in lieu of monthly fees and comparatively affluent widows who have the ability to pay live in these ashrams. For this reason, they were not included in the study. However there was another Ashram called Gobindabari which keeps around 22-25 widows against a monthly payment of Rs 1100/-. After from shelter, it also includes lunch while the widows manage breakfast and dinner on their own. Some ashrams like Nabadwip Samajbari who organize *bhogs* for the devotees during lunch time distribute the left over to the widows.

No NGO is believed to be working for these widows.



Nabadwip Bhajanashram



Nabadwip Samajbari

3.2 Tarapith:

Tarapith is a small town near Rampurhat in Birbhum district of West Bengal in India. It is located on the banks of Dwaraka river. Tarapith is regarded as one of the 52 Shakti Peethams of India. According to Hindu belief, an insulted Sati, the wife of Lord Shiva, sacrificed herself at an yagna which was being performed by her father Dakshmaharaj. Angry with this incident Lord Shiva started the tandava nritya (a dance of destruction). This incident forced Lord Vishnu to use his Sudershan chakra to cut the body of Sati into several places. Sati's body was thus scattered all over what is presently the Indian subcontinent. There are 51 such holy spots where temples have been erected and they are called Pithas or the

Shakti Pithas. Some of the Pithas are in West Bengal the most famous being Tarapith and Kalighat. Enshrined at the temple is a murti of the Goddess Tara, who according to local legend suckled the thirst drenched Shiva, and saved him from suffering. Tarapith is a mahapith from where Sadhak Bama Khapa acquired "Siddhi Laav". This is one of the most sacred place where every year several millions of devotees come to offer Puja. This continuous stream of devotees provides a somewhat steady source of income for the beggars around the temple including the widows. The temple authorities run an 'Anna Satra' where meal is distributed to the destitute during lunch time. This meal is sponsored by the devotees as a part of their worship to Ma Tara as popular belief goes that offering Puja at this Mahapitham with a holy



The main temple

heart and full belief fulfills one's earnest desires. This is a reason for which the poor and the needy throng the place. Bharat Sevashram Sangha, Tarapith provides daily mid-day meal to 50-60 widows on an average and also gives saris once a year. The widows also get clothes from the temple authorities once a year. Approximately 400-500 destitute women live in Tarapith including the widows, deserted women, and also married. In fact it is almost impossible to delineate them based on pre-defined categories and due to their extreme poverty, all of them appear as a homogenous group. This is true for all the religious places.

3.3 Kalighat:

The popularity of Kalighat as a place of worship of the all powerful Mother goddess Kali stems from the fact that according to Hindu mythology and ancient Hindu scriptures like "Chandi," Kalighat in Kolkata is a place where the toe of the right foot of Sati fell and as such it is regarded as one of the 52 Shakti Peethas that exist in India. As far as the cult of Tantra is concerned, Kalighat is regarded as the ultimate. At any given day, a visit to Kalighat will reveal thousands of pilgrims literally barging at this sacred shrine for a glimpse of the presiding deity. Raja Basanta Roy, uncle of Pratapaditya and the King of Jessore, Bangladesh perhaps built what is now known as Old Temple. This temple was situated on the banks of river Adi Ganga. The natmandir, a hall attached to the sanctum sanctorum is in the southern side while Shiva's temple is situated in the north-east. There is also a temple dedicated to Radha Krishna built in 1843 by a zamindar of Baowali. The speciality of Kali of this temple is the long protruded tongue made of gold. This is a different appearance from the other visualisations of Kali.

Kalighat temple has references in 15th century texts. The original temple was a small hut. The present temple was built by the Sabarna Roy Choudhury family of Barisha in 1809. They offered 595 bighas of land to the Temple deity so that worship and service could be continued smoothly. It is believed by some scholars that the name Calcutta was derived from Kalighata. In the early days traders halted at Kalighat to pay patronage to the goddess. The temple is on the banks of a small canal called Adi Ganga, connecting to Hooghly. The present dakshina Kali idol of touchstone was created by two saints - Brahmananda Giri and Atmaram Giri. It was Padmabati Devi, the mother



The main temple

of Laksmikanta Roy Choudhury who discovered the fossils of Sati's finger in a lake called Kalikunda. This made Kalighat as one of the 51 Shakti Pithas. In the past, wealthy Bengali merchants and landlords (Zamindars) were great patrons of the Kalighat temple and the legacy is still alive today. But Kalighat is a haven for people from all walks of life and particularly Kalighat temple is surrounded by the ugly specter of poverty from all sides. The wealthy businessmen and other people organize "*kangali bhojan*" (feeding the poor) in the precincts of the temple as a part of the pujas on a regular basis. Amongst the destitute who throng the place are the widows who get a square meal enough to sustain them for the day. Sometimes they also saris etc from the devotees. Earlier Missionaries of Charity which runs a home adjacent to the temple used to give them food and garments, but of late the practice has discontinued. It was learnt that MC shelter homes only serve people with terminal diseases. According to rough estimates 900-1500 women (which include widows, physically incapacitated and other destitute women as well) beg at Kalighat and the population is quite dynamic and varies with festivals. While many of them go back to the nearby slums, others live in the pavements, stalls and other nook and corner of the temple.

3.4 Dakshineswar/Adyapeeth:

The Dakshineswar Kali Temple is located in Dakshineswar near Kolkata. Situated on the eastern bank of the Hooghly River, the presiding deity of the temple is

Bhavatarini, an aspect of Kali, literally meaning, 'She who takes Her devotees across the ocean of existence'. Legend has it that Rani Rashmoni who by birth was born to a fisherman's family and later on was married to a rich Bengali merchant was blessed with a divine vision which directed her to build a temple of Kali in Bengal. Ever since that dream, she ran from pillar to post in search of land where she could build the Kali temple. Her ordeal came to an end when she bought a sprawling 25 acres of land at Dakshineswar. The temple was built in 1855. The temple compound, apart from the nine-spired main temple, contains a large courtyard surrounding the temple, with rooms along the boundary walls. There are twelve shrines



The main temple

dedicated to the aspects of Shiva, Kali's companion, along the riverfront, a temple to Radha-Krishna, a bathing ghat on the river, a bookshop, a shrine to Rani Rashmoni, and a parking lot. The chamber in the northwestern corner just beyond the last of the Shiva temples, is where Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa spent a considerable part of his life. Sri Ramakrishna was responsible for bringing much in the way of both fame and pilgrims to the temple. Built in the traditional 'Nava-ratna' or nine spires style of Bengal architecture, the three-storeyed south-facing temple has nine spires distributed in upper two storeys, and stands on a high platform with a flight of stairs and rises over 100 feet high. The garbha griha (sanctum sanctorum) houses an idol of Bhavatarini, standing on the chest of a lying Shiva, and the two idols are placed on a thousand-petaled lotus made of silver.

Close to the main temple are the row of twelve identical Shiva temples built facing the east in the typical 'Aat Chala' Bengal architecture, they are built on either side of the ghat on the Hoogly river. To the North east of the Temple Complex is the Vishnu Temple or the Radha Kanta's Temple. A flight of steps lead to the columned verandah and into the temple where a silver throne rests with a 21 and half inches idol of Lord Krishna and 16 inches idol of Radha.

Dakshineswar Adyapeeth Math, located at Baranagar and quite nearby the Dakshineswar temple was founded by Annada Thakur. Apart from the sprawling temple complex, it runs a residential home called Sarada Peeth for widows and aged women. Also it provides medical help, offer free meals as well as clothes for the poor and needy. Adyapeeth Matri Ashram (Widows' Home) houses approximately 85 widows without family to support them who wish to lead a religious life. Also, through *Nara Narayan Seva* (feeding of the poor), food is distributed to approximately 300 to 500 people daily.

The temple economy of Dakshineswar-Adyapith supports approximately 500-600 destitute women including widows.

3.5 Furfura Sharif:

Furfura Sharif is a village in Jangipara block in Hooghly District in West Bengal. It is a holy place for Muslims. The mosque built by Muqlish Khan in 1375 is a site for Muslim pilgrimage, especially during the Pir's mela (fair).[1] It attracts large number of pilgrims during Urs festival. Muslims in the area are believed to be chiefly Ashrafs and are said to be descendants of Muslims who invaded Bengal in the 14th century. There is a tradition that the Bagdi king who ruled here was defeated by Hazrat Shah Kabir Halibi and Hazrat Karamuddin, both of whom were killed in the battle. Their tombs are revered to this day by both Hindus and Muslims. The most important place within Furfura Sharif is the Mazaar Sharif (Tomb) of Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddique(Rh) and his five sons, popularly known as the 'Panch Huzur Keblah'. Thousands of people from all over India come to visit their tombs every year.

Hazrat Abu Bakr was born in 1846 in Furfura-Sharif. He was a social and religious reformer, so he was also known as 'Mujaddid-e-Zaman'. He founded many charitable institutes, orphanages and free health center. He was also a great educationist who realized that it is through education he can free the society of all evils and so he founded several madrasas, schools and learning centers. In Furfura Sharif he established Madrasa, along with free boarding facilities for the underprivileged students. He encouraged female education by establishing a



The main mazar

school for girls in Furfura Sharif named "Siddiqua High School". His contributions were recognized by several historians and literati. He was a great patriot and was involved in the freedom struggle of India. He was the founder of the "Order Of Furfura Sharif" or "Silsila-e-Furfura Sharif". He belonged to the Ahle-Sunnat-Wal-Jamaat school of thoughts. He was also the founder of the

religious congregation, which is still observed on the 21st 22nd and 23rd of Falgun Bengali month (Aprox 5th, 6th & 7th of March) every year by his grandsons. He did not prefer calling this congregation a "Urs" but rather prefer it being called "Isale-Sawab".

A large number of women including widows everyday flock to the mazar complex for begging as well as getting mid day meals. While many of them have migrated from districts like Burdwan, Murshidabad, 24 Parganas (N), there are some local residents as well. Their numbers swell during the annual congregation of the pilgrims.

3.6 Patharchapri:

Patharchapri is a village approximately 10 km from Siuri town in Birbhum district of West Bengal. This mazar was erected in the memory of Hazrat Data Mahboob Shah. This place is a popular location for the Muslims as well as the Hindus of Birbhum, Murshidabad, Maldah, Burdwan etc. Around 50-60 widows (including outsiders and resident, both Hindus and Muslims) live in the mazar complex as well as the adjacent village. Apart from providing meal twice daily, the mazar authorities also run a charitable dispensary where treatment for minor ailments is done for the poor and the needy.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The present chapter deals with the demography of the respondents, their living conditions and access to basic support services as well as relationship with other stakeholders.

4.1 Demography:

Total Respondents = 200	
Religion: Hindu: 173 Muslim: 27 Others: 0	Mother Tongue: Bengali: 179 Hindi: 14 Others: 7
Caste: General: 44 SC: 106 ST: 10 OBC:13	Identity Proof: Birth Certificate: 0 Voter ID Card: 22 Voter ID Card & Ration Card: 121 Ration Card: 14 None: 43
Size of the Family: 1-2: 88 3-4: 43 5-6: 62 6+: 7	Educational Qualification: Illiterate: 174 Functionally Literate: 12 Primary: 2 High school and above: 0
Age Group: 30-40: 5 41-50: 23 51-60: 59 61-70: 85 70+ : 28	Origin: Rural: 184 Urban: 16

173 out of the 200 respondents were Hindus while 27 of them were Muslims. The Hindus were interviewed from Nabadwip, Tarapith, Patharchapri, Dakshneswar/Adyapeeth and Kalighat while the Muslims were interviewed from Patharchapri and Furfura Sharif. Out of the 173 Hindu respondents, 106 belonged to SC and 10 belonged to ST community. Although the sampling was strictly representative in nature, nevertheless it gives a gross idea about the large presence of scheduled caste women amongst the destitute widows thereby indicating the socio-economic vulnerability of their respective castes. Bengali was the mother tongue of approximately 90% of the respondents. Most of them (79%) had identity proof while the rest 21 have either lost it due to migration and

frequent change of address or have come from Bangladesh. The latter case was seen in Nabadwip. 87% of them were completely illiterate while only 6% of them could barely write their names. 92% of the respondents were from rural origin while 8% of them came from the urban/sub-urban areas. The latter were found in Kalighat and Dakshineswar

Socio-economic Condition of the Respondents:

4.2.1 Dwelling Place:

Dwelling Place	Res(n)
Ashram	15
Outside Ashram/Place of Worship	64
Pavement/Street	35
Others	86
Total	200

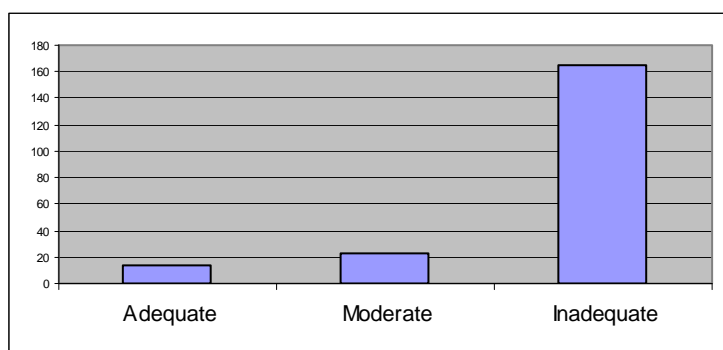
15 respondents were residents of Ashrams (5 from Nabadwip Bhajanshram while 10 from Sarada Peeth, Adyapeeth). Almost 50% of them were found to be living outside the temples/mazars or in the nook and corners of the lanes and bye-lanes of the temple towns especially Nabadwip. 43% of them were living in houses, almost all of which were rented accommodations in hutments/shanties lacking basic needs like proper water supply and sanitation etc.

Based on place of dwelling, we may broadly describe two kinds of widows:

- Widows on the temple/math/mosque/mazar includes the widows living in the Bhajanashram (Nabadwip), shelter home run by the temple authorities (Adyapith) and also the widows living in the precincts of the place of worship
- Widows off the temple/math/mosque/mazar includes the widows who live in rented accommodation, shops & stalls, pavements, slums, old buildings & verandah etc

4.2.2 Living Conditions:

Living Condition	Res(n)
Adequate	13
Moderate	22
Inadequate	165
Total	200



The above table shows that the living condition of the widows is extremely poor save those who live in the Ashrams where decent accommodation has been provided. In Tarapith, it was seen that many widows have share the accommodation at a place called Mathpara. The rent of the hutment varies from Rs 200-300/ and it would be too wishful to expect even basic amenities at this frugal rent. Things get more aggravated during monsoon when the roof leaks. Many widows were also found to be living in the shops/stalls around the temples. In Nabadwip, while some widows live in rented accommodation in shanties, dilapidated houses, some spend the night in the verandahs, porticos etc. In Kalighat too, most of the widows live in the pavements, beneath the stalls while a few of them live in the shanties of Tollygunge, alongside the Sealdah-Budge Budge railway line. Similar trend has been seen in Adyapeeth and Furfura Sharif. In Patharchapri, the widows sleep in the enclosure and courtyard across the sprawling mazar complex.



Old building provide refuge to widows -
Nabadwip

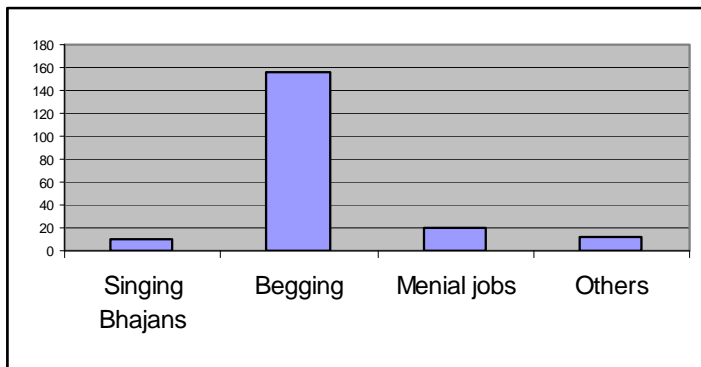


Widows & destitute living in the street -
Kalighat

4.2.3 Main Source of Income:

Main Source of Income	Res(n)
Singing Bhajans	10
Begging	157

Menial jobs	21
Others	12
Total	200



Almost 79% of the respondents live on begging while only 5% of them live on singing bhajans. As a matter of fact, singing bhajan as an occupation has only been witnessed in Nabadwip and is not practiced in any other Hindu holy place. Nabadwip, which can certainly be described as town of “white rainbows”, the widows describe bhajan as well as asking alms as “*Radheshyam kori*” (We take the name of Radheshyam). Some widows were found to be engaged in menial jobs in the place of worship as well as in the adjacent stalls/shops etc. This has been marked in Tarapith and Kalighat where widows were seen to be engaged in making garlands, preparing the offerings (*dalas*) to be offered to the deity by the pilgrims.



Dala arcade - Dakshineswar



Stalls around the temple - Kalighat

The temple economy provides living for a substantial number of widows

4.2.3 Late Husband’s Occupation:

Husband's occupation	Res(n)
Landowner	8
Small business	20

Agricultural/casual labour	136
Service	2
Others	13
None	21
Total	200

It was seen that 68% of the late husbands were agricultural labourers while 10% each were small businessmen and unemployed. As the overwhelming women belonged to extremely poor families, they were subsequently married in destitute families, the primary reason being the inability of their fathers to pay high dowry. In other words, their fathers could not pay the price of seeing their daughters settled in affluent families. However, a few women had seen better days in their married life but later things went awry due to factors like terminal disease of husband eating away the family resource, early widowhood due to untimely death of husband and resulting neglect and torture at in-laws house, cruel treatment and neglect by sons and daughter-in-laws etc.

During interactive sessions, it was seen that some women belonged to so-called “fallen category” who had eloped with their fiancés and were deserted later. The study team also came across few former sex workers who have taken shelter in Nabadwip in their twilight days. Hence it was difficult to ascertain how many of the respondents were actually married. The team assumed that these women must have talked about their male partners in the absence of their husbands.

4.2.4 Status of the Respondent vis-à-vis Socio-economic Indicators:

Comments	Yes	No	Total
Like to have job/be self sufficient	34	166	200
Have vocational training skills	7	193	200
Pandas/clergy play important role in life	148	52	200
Want to form widows' association	19	181	200
Get assistance from Govt./NGO	17	183	200

Only a few women (17%) who were relatively young were interested to have job or be self-sufficient. While it is true that most of the women were aged and incapacitated to do menial jobs due to perpetual illness, in some cases it was seen that relatively able bodied women shy away from chores and prefer to live on alms. Recounting her earlier experience of working with the widows of Nabadwip, Mrs. Malini Bhattacharya, Chairman, West Bengal State Women’s Commission said that she found the widows accepted the life of mendicancy and were not willing to learn some trade to become self-sufficient.

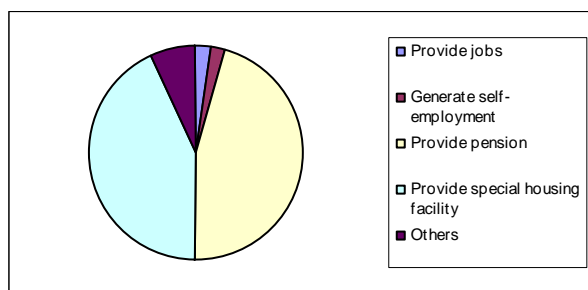
A complete contrast has also been witnessed in few cases. Asna Bibi (name changed), aged 62 years lives in the precincts of Patharchapri Mazar. She is suffering from pharyngeal cancer and needs regular treatment. In spite of the severity of her disease, she refuses to beg and does odd job in the Mazar to eke

out her livelihood. These are only isolated examples and in general, even the able bodied widows and destitute women prefer to seek alms than work. According to Sentu Maharaj, Secretary of Tarapith Sebayet Trust or Swamiji of Bharat Sevashram Sangha, Tarapith, there are a number of professional beggars apart from the needy widows on the street. Their views were corroborated by Mr. Nurul Absar, Executive Officer of Patharchapri Mazar.

Pandas, clergy play an important role for those who are directly connected with the temple economy. However most of the respondents opined that their role is not quite pro-active and the religious institutions could have done more for them. On a general note, the proactive role of the pandas and pother functionaries of religious organizations were more witnessed in the rural areas compared to the urban. In Kolkata, the widows felt the pandas/sebayets are completely indifferent to miserable condition in spite of their easy access to power structure. One widow snapped of Kalighat snapped, *“Ora madder jonno ki korbe, parle ora amader theke nebe.”* (What will they do for us, if possible they will snatch from us.) In Tarapith, it was seen that the temple authorities distribute clothes amongst the poor and the needy every year. Positive role about the mazar functionaries was also heard in Patharchapri. In Kalighat, the respondents remarked that they are only looked down as a burden of the society by the authorities. Due to increased security cover at Kalighat, the widows are not allowed to beg near the entrance of the sanctum sanctorium and it was alleged that police heckle the widows who try to enter there.

4.2.5 Expectation from Government:

Expectation from Govt.	Res(n)
Provide jobs	11
Generate self-employment	7
Provide pension	191
Provide special housing facility	179
Others	29



The key expectations from the Government are pension and special housing schemes. These demands are pretty understandable in view of the fact that only 1

out of the 100 respondents was about to get pension under National Old age Pension Scheme (NOAPS). While a few had tried to apply for pension under NOAPS as well as Indira Gandhi Widow Pension Scheme, nothing has fructified due to procedural difficulties. While acknowledging the fact that the quantum of pension sanctioned is abysmally less compared to the demand, another procedural difficulty emerges for allotting pension to these poor women. Barring a few, all the women have migrated from their homes in search of food and shelter (pious reason being secondary) and their ID cards refer to their domicile address. However, only domicile widows and elderly can be given pension by their respective Gram Panchayats under the current rule. So apart from stepping up the initiative to increase more allocation for widow/elder pension in the source areas (i.e. the impoverished districts of Bengal from where the widows have migrated), the time has probably come of framing a new kind of benefit scheme for this dynamic population. Mr. Biman Chatterjee, Panchayat member of Sahapur GP under whose jurisdiction the Tarapith temple lies acknowledged the problem of non-availability of pension of the widows but pleaded helplessness due to procedural difficulties. He further added that in spite of the huge grass root level demand for pension, there were only 4 quotas available in Sahapur GP and no further application could be processed till the demise of an existing pensioner. The same problem was heard in Nabadwip when the widows sarcastically commented about the pension scheme, "*Keu morle amader goti hoi.*" (If any widow dies, probably then some of us would be benefited).

4.2 Marital Life & Widowhood:

4.4.1 Age of Marriage:

Age of Marriage	Res(n)
10-15 years	183
16-20 years	17
20 years +	0
Total	200

More than 90% of the women were married at a very early age, sometimes as low as 8-9 years. At the tender age, most of them had no concept of conjugal life. For this reason, they had been abused physically as well as sexually and emotionally.

4.4.2 Age Difference between Bride & Groom

Years	Res(n)
0-5 years	3
6 - 10 years	51
11- 15 years	61
16 - 20 years	58

20 years +	27
Total	200

The age difference between the bride and the groom had been glaring pointing out the poignant social malaise and the haplessness of the fathers of the brides who had to get their children married off to much elder grooms (sometimes even senior to the fathers) due to their financial handicap. 29% of the respondents said that their age gap with their husbands was 16-20 years while 14.5% of them opined that it was more than 20 years.

Parbati Mal (name changed) of a village near Siuri was married off at 10 years of age to a widower aged 40 years. Hailing from an extremely poor family, her father was in no position to pay for her dowry. When this man from the neighbouring village approached her father to marry her without any dowry, he readily agreed in spite of the age difference. She recollected that even her step-daughter was older than her. Unable to understand the intricacies of nuptial life and suffering from the abuses of her mother-in-law, she used to run away every day to her paternal place only to be forcefully sent back. She became a widow with two sons at the age of 24. She worked hard to sustain her family and bring up her sons. After the marriage of her sons, she had squabbles with her daughter-in-laws who drove her out of her house. She took shelter in her brother's house who took was extremely poor. He ultimately brought her to Tarapith. Here she begs at the temple's door steps and lives in a rented accommodation at Mathpara. She has no plans to return to her family fold as it has very clear to her that she has become a non-entity for her sons.



Interviewing at Nabadwip

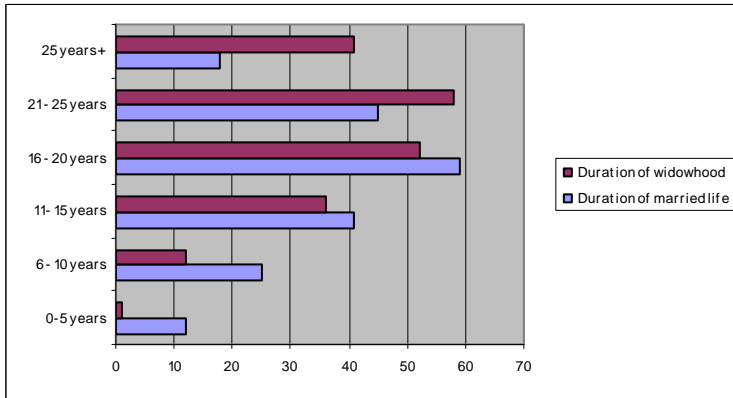


Interviewing at Kalighat

4.4.3 Duration of Marital Life & Widowhood:

Comments	Duration of married life	Duration of widowhood
0-5 years	12	1

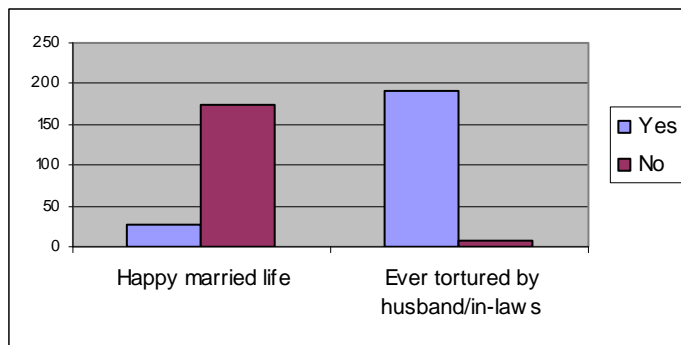
6 - 10 years	25	12
11- 15 years	41	36
16 - 20 years	59	52
21 - 25 years	45	58
25 years +	18	41
Total	200	200



Needless to mention that disproportionate age difference between the bride and the groom would ultimately result in early widowhood, which has been quite amplified in the above table.

4.4.4 Status of Married Life:

Status of Married Life	Yes	No	Total
Happy married life	26	174	200
Ever tortured by husband/in-laws	192	8	200

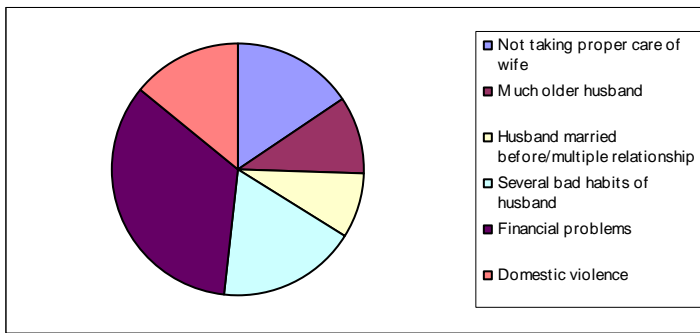


Only 13% of the of the felt that they had a happy married life in terms of food, clothing and shelter while not taking into account any case of emotional or mental abuse. The women had taken for granted that emotional abuse was a part and parcel in the life of any woman and their concept of happiness did not

include the incidents of emotional abuses unless and until it crossed the threshold limit. Thus only 4% of the women felt that they were not tortured by their husbands and in-laws. This figure too is subject to further verification as the concept of 'abuse' is very much relative and depends on socio-economic and cultural context.

4.4.4.1 Reasons for Unhappy Married Life:

Reasons (n=174)	Res(n)
Not taking proper care of wife	60
Much older husband	39
Husband married before/multiple relationship	32
Several bad habits of husband	69
Financial problems	132
Domestic violence	55



The key reasons for unhappy married life are inter-related and could be broadly said as the generic anomalies of an economically weaker section and the resultant may existing social dysfunctions. Ultimately these factors create a strong 'push' effect for which the women are ejected out of the familial trajectory and end up in the religious places where some arrangements for food, clothing and shelter could be managed.



Interviewing at Adyapeeth

4.4.4.2 Status of Inheritance:

Comments	Yes	No	Total
Savings left by husband	11	189	200
Property left by husband (other than home)	26	174	200
Got chance to take decision about property (n=26)	4	22	20

Approximately 5% of the husbands left some savings while 13% left some properties i.e. agricultural land. Houses and little homestead land were kept out of the purview of the question as it was learnt from the respondents that the houses they lived in were mostly dilapidated structures and mostly with multiple ownership. Even for the land holdings, it was seen that only 4 out of the 22 respondents could take a decision about their property.

In this changing economic and social milieu, the younger generation is searching for new identities encompassing economic independence and redefined social roles within, as well as outside, the family. The changing economic structure has reduced the dependence of rural families on land, which had provided strength to bonds between generations. The traditional sense of duty and obligation of the younger generation towards their older generation is being eroded. The older generation is caught between the decline in traditional values on the one hand and the absence of an adequate social security system, on the other.

There is a significant correlation between land holding and gender empowerment especially in the context of rural Bengal. Shanti Mondal (name changed) lived in a village near Muhammed Bazar at Birbhum. She became a widow with one son at the age of 27. Her husband was a marginal farmer and left behind around 2 bighas of agricultural. The sole source of her income was the agricultural produce of the land. In spite of poverty, she could somehow manage to run her family based on her income. When her son grew up and got married, he forced his mother to sell off the land as well as the house and move to Rampurhat with the entire family. At first she didn't agree, but when he threatened to commit suicide, she had to relent. After they came to Rampurhat, they put up in a rented house. Soon after, her son eloped with another woman, taking away all the money from the sales proceedings of the property. By the time, Shanti had become too old to do any work. Her daughter-in-law started to work as a domestic help in Rampurhat town and she came to beg at Tarapith. Every weekend she returns home with the week's collection. She ended up saying that her 2 grandsons her dependent on her income to meet their educational expenses.



Interviewing the functionaries at Samajbari-
Nabadwip



Group Discussion at Tarapeeth

4.3 Migration & Relationship with Family:

4.4.1 Whether Migrated/Living Alone:

Comments	Yes	No	Total
Migrated from home/native place	168	32	200
Living alone	95	105	200

84% of the women have migrated from other places of West Bengal. The following table gives a broad idea about the original residence of the migrants. Almost 47% of the respondents were living alone while the majority of the rest 53% were living with other widows in shared rooms. It was seen in Nabadwip as well as Tarapith that few widows were living with their daughters who too were widows. Some were found to be living with their entire family in the footpaths/makeshift shanties mostly in Kalighat and Dakshineswar area.

Minati Sardar (name changed) of Kalighat says that she was born in the footpath of Kalighat, got married here and now staying with her son and daughter-in-law in the footpath of Kalighat. She says that after her husband's death she worked as a domestic help but stopped work after she was detected with respiratory ailments. She says that Kalighat temple offers her a safe refuge and ensures the availability of free lunch everyday.



Widow living with her daughter-in-law -
Kalighat



Widow with her son - Adyapeeth

Living with the families

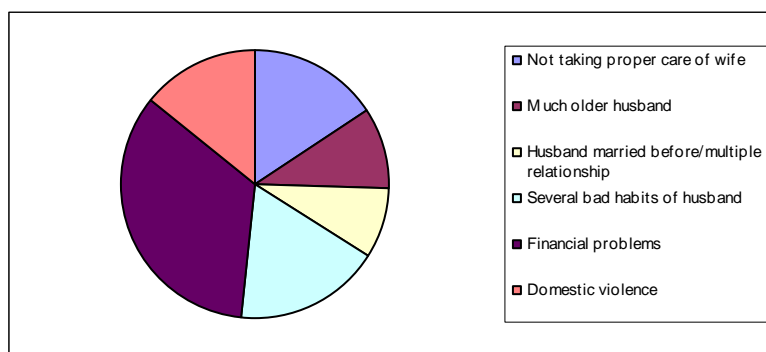
Surveyed Area	Native Place
Nabadwip Dham	Nadia, Hooghly, Burdwan, Jalpaiguri, North & South Dinajpur, Bangladesh
Tarapith	Birbhum, Burdwan, Murshidabad, Malda, Bihar
Patharchapri	Birbhum, Burdwan, Dumka plus some locals
Furfura Sharif	24 Parganas (N & S), Hooghly, Burdwan
Dakshineswar/Adyapith	24 Parganas (N & S), Hooghly, Burdwan, Nadia,
Kalighat	24 Parganas (S), Purba Medinipur, Darbhanga, Purnea, Mujaffarpur plus some locals,

In Kalighat as well as Patharchapri, a number of widows were local residents. The widows in the streets of Kalighat and its slums like Chetla, Tollygunge, Canal sides of south and eastern Kolkata flock to the temple in the morning. It is interesting to note that a number of Bangladeshis were found to be living in Nabadwip. They were forced to migrate from their country due to abject poverty, communal violence etc. Some of them crossed over during 1971.

In the course of the study, it was seen that it is very difficult to distinguish between a widow, a deserted woman and even a married woman who has fallen into bad days due to husband's incapacitation or other financial hardship. Charu Saha (name changed) originally belonged to Bangladesh and was never married. She crossed over to India in 1971 after her father was slaughtered by the Pakistani army. She stayed in a relative place and subsequently moved to Nabadwip after the death of her relative. Although she is not a widow, but she wears a white sari, has trimmed her hair and does not wear any ornament. Apparently she behaves like a widow and has perfectly mingled with other widows of the locality.

4.4.1.2 Reasons for Migration (Multiple Response):

Reasons for migration	Res(n)
Supports religious motives	12
Economic problems	109
Ill treatment by the family members	55
No one to look after	69
Others	29



The primary reason for migration is economic (approx. 55%) as apparent from the above table. Coupled with this problem are the social causes like ill treatment by family members, desertions and being ostracized from the family. Close relatives and neighbours duping the widows of their properties or usurping them by sheer brutal force followed by subsequent eviction have been recorded in number of cases. Very few (6%) have come for devotional purpose and they were seen only in Nabadwip. It may be interesting to note that few Manipuri women being devout Vaishnavs have come to spend their twilight days in Nabadwip. In general, the aura of renunciation that is associated with the widows was completely absent. Stakeholders like pandas, functionaries of ashrams, mazars opined that the overwhelming reason for migration is socio-economic rather than religious. According to Mr. Biswanath Chowdhry of Nabadwip Bhajanashram, the widows do not observe all the customary religious strictures like observance of *ekadoshi*, shunning of non-vegetarian food etc. In Nabadwip it was seen that most of the widows follow basic strictures like wearing of white saris apart from not wearing any ornament. The Executive Officer of Patharchapri Mazar, Mr Mohammed Nurul Absar and the Manager, Mr. Motahar Hussain specifically pointed out the reasons for high rate of influx of the widows.

- Early marriage and subsequent desertion by the husbands
- Gender violence and discrimination at in-laws' house
- Substantial age difference between the bride and the groom
- Lack of education and social awareness

Mr Absar further added that the women of backward class including SC, ST and Muslims suffer the most and cited the example of Patharchapri Mazar where women mostly belonging to this category routinely come.

Foreigner tag on widow at home

Badkulla, April 22: Shephali Saha cannot let her daughter or grandchildren into her house here in Nadia because she has been branded a Bangladeshi national by the local club.

Almost 80 per cent of the 60-year-old widow's land has been taken away by Kishor Sangha, which has built a clubhouse there. Shephali has been threatened with dire consequences if she does not vacate the remaining portion of the land – on which stands her small hut – in a few days. According to documents, Shephali is an Indian citizen. She has been living on that plot, 75 km from Calcutta, for 42 years and works as a domestic help in the locality. She had been working in the house of a rich farmer, Nagendra Bhowmik, since 1966 until he died in 1992, leaving no direct heir to his property. After his death, Bhowmik's relatives – residents of Calcutta – and Shephali appealed to the government for a share of his property. The government gave Shephali 5 cottahs there in 2000. Nagendrababu's relatives got their shares and sold them.

The local panchayat, which earlier gave her residence and citizenship certificates, supported her claim. According to the Badkulla panchayat, Shephali has been paying her taxes to the village body and land departments regularly, but the club has almost taken away her right to her own land.

Three months ago, some 70 youths stormed into her premises, built the club room and fenced off around 4 cottahs. As if this was not enough, the club members told Shephali, who lives alone, that no one can visit her without their permission. "They abuse me. My daughter and grandchildren can't come to my house. I meet them far from my house if I have to," said Shephali, tears rolling down.

But the club members appeared unfazed. "She is a Bangladeshi. We need to keep a close watch on her. She has acquired the land illegally. We want her to return to Bangladesh," said Ganesh Saha, its secretary.

The widow knocked the door of the administration after the charge was levelled. Ranaghat subdivisional officer Shew Kumar Ram ordered an inquiry in February. The probe by the land department in March proved Shephali's claims correct. But Kishor Sangha remains where it was.

(Source: The Telegraph, 22nd April 2009)

4.4.2 Respondent's Socio-economic Condition after Bereavement:

Situation after husband passed away	Res(n)
Same as before	38
Worse	113
Worst	49
Other	0
Total	200



In a traditional patriarchal society where men plays the role of pivotal in the entire life of a woman, it would be only gainsaying to state that the conditions of the women deteriorated after the demise of the husband. During the course of the study, the team came across countless examples of widows who were driven out of their houses at their young age by their in-laws after the demise of their husbands branding them as “ill omen of the family” or “devouring her husband”. This eventually meant bringing the social death of the widows post the demise of their husbands.

Kin drive widow out of home

Balurghat, July 7: A childless widow, who had once given shelter to her nephew and his wife in her house, has been driven out by them. Bahamani Besra of Kamarpara, 12km from here, lodged an FIR with Balurghat police station this morning against her nephew Babulal Hembrom. In her complaint, she has appealed to the inspector-in-charge to ensure her return home at the earliest. The 50-year-old woman had lost her husband Maghi Besra a few years ago. Since then, she had been living alone. Two years ago, Babulal and his wife Minati expressed their desire to stay with her. Bahamani agreed to the proposal. But within a few days of staying with Bahamani, Babulal and his wife started torturing the widow regularly and demanded that she gift the property to them. The couple also felled trees planted by her and sold them off. About one-and-a-half-months ago, when Bahamani protested against the sale of a tree by Babulal, she was driven away from home. Bahamani spent the month with her sister and returned to her home on Monday. But Babulal threatened her with dire

consequences and drove her out again.

(Source: *The Telegraph*, 7th July 2008)

Mother beaten & thrown out

Burdwan, Aug. 21: Surjya Saha, 40, is a well-to-do farmer, but he did not have enough for his aged mother. In her complaint to Burdwan court, Padma Saha of Memari said she was driven out of the two-storey house her husband built many years ago and not allowed to enter again.

Once a wealthy fish trader, her husband Amulya died of cancer 27 years ago, leaving his wife almost a pauper. The widow worked as a domestic help to raise her three sons, Chandra, Surjya and Tara. Chandra, the eldest, gradually picked up the reins of his father's business. But he died of a heart attack in 2005. "Things were fine when he was alive. After his death, Surjya threw me out of the house," said Padma.

She stays with Tara, 35, but a labourer, he struggles to make ends meet.

The old woman's drive to get her house back has proved futile. Neither police nor the Panchayat has helped. In July 2005, she knocked on the door of the Burdwan chief judicial magistrate's court. Moved by her plight, lawyer Biswajit Das offered to take up her case without a fee. In March last year, the court ordered Surjya to pay his mother Rs 500 a month. He paid Rs 200 to Rs 300 for three months and then stopped giving anything. Padma moved court again last December. Her lawyer said Surjya appeared in court thrice in the past seven months and pleaded that he did not have money for his mother.

(Source: *The Telegraph*, 21st April 2007)

4.4.3 Frequency of Visit by Family & Friends (n=168):

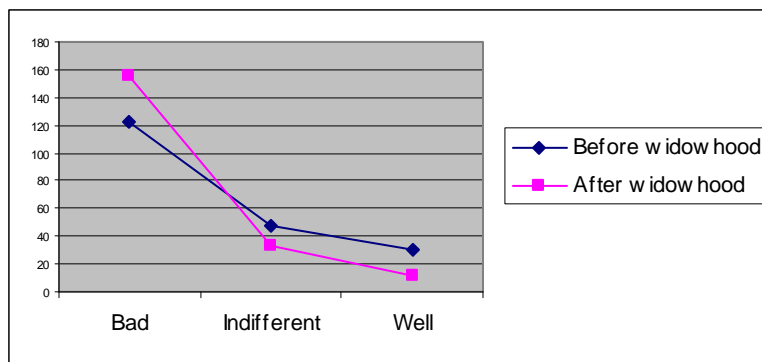
Frequency of visit by family & friends	Res(n)
Never	120
Often	13
Sometimes	35
Total	168

In table no. 4.4.1, it was seen that 168 out of the 200 respondents have migrated from their homes while the rest 32 were local residents. For the former category, it was seen that friends and relations who sometimes live nearby, come to visit the widows. But in most of the cases (71%), the widows live a solitary life which is not frequented by the friends and relatives. On a similar vein, it cannot be said

for even those who live with their relations, that there exists a cordial and amicable relationship with the family members.

4.4.4 Treatment of Family Members:

Treatment of family members	Before widowhood	After widowhood
Bad	122	155
Indifferent	48	33
Well	30	12
Total	200	200



The treatment by the family members worsened after widowhood when a woman had to suffer the double trauma of being a woman as well as being a widow.

4.5 Overall Social Status:

Comments	Yes	No	Total
Have contact with family members	117	83	200
Want to return home	24	176	200
Receive maintenance from relations	0	200	200
Expected to serve God, priest, pilgrims	59	141	200
Feel exploited physically/emotionally	129	71	200
Anybody accused of being responsible for husband's death	112	88	200
Ever faced social discrimination	181	19	200
Allowed to attend social/auspicious functions	19	181	200
Suffer from insecurity	176	24	200



Food being served at Kalighat



Received her day's meal - Kalighat

As mentioned earlier, the pull factor of the religious places is the assurance of a meal, minimal shelter (although wretched) and income in the form of alms. The push factors as discussed elaborately earlier are extreme poverty, gender violence, apathy towards widows and loosening of family bonding. Devotional reasons or subservience to the Almighty has never been the key reason for this migration although the widows try to extract a veneer of social respect soaked in piousness to assert nay feebly put forward their social status. Thus a widow from Nabadwip would say "*Radhey Shyam kori*" (We chant the name of Radha Shyam) or "*Madhukori kori*" (Vaishnav term of seeking alms) or the widows of Furfura Sharif and Patharchapri would say, "*Pir babar asroye achhi*" (We live in the shelter of the revered Pir) instead of straightforwardly saying that their key and only source of sustenance is begging. Thus, other than a handful, who are living in the Bhajanahrams of Nabadwip or shelter home of Adyapith, the plight of a widow is no better than an average beggar and in most cases absolutely impossible to delineate between the two. So the overall social status of a widow is somewhat similar to a beggar on the street. There is a substantial number of destitute women with husbands, deserted women (both by husbands as well as partners), or women had been in flesh trade who live along with the widows and the entire entity appears as a homogenous group. The gender bias and discrimination the afflict the widows have a similar cascading effect amongst other marginalized women as well.

In spite of all the hardships especially in terms of living conditions, few (12%) are willing to return home, the reasons being multipurpose. Firstly, there is acute poverty at home and widows understand quite well that with their incapacitated physique, it would not be possible to eke out a livelihood there and the would have to live at the mercy of their children/relatives which they abhor. On the other hand, at least one meal a day is more less ensured for the widows in the temples, ashrams etc and some meager income could be worked out through begging. Secondly, the widows are well aware of their dysfunctional family structure and the discrimination they had faced in the past (over 80% of them as seen in the table) for which they know quite well that they would be unwelcome

guests in the family. Thirdly, they have learned to lead an independent existence with their feeble efforts. A visible camaraderie has been witnessed amongst the widows who share food and accommodation and try to help their friends in distress. In isolated cases though, some tension between locals and outsiders were witnessed.



The bustling temple - Tarapith



Shops outside the temple - Kalighat

The pull factor - flourishing temple economy

Although the study team did come across only a few young widows, most of them were unwilling to remarry because of the fear that their children from earlier marriage would find no place in their new homes. The opinion of the elderly about widow remarriage had been somewhat mixed. Many felt that it was primary duty of the mother to look after their children and the widows could be subject to ridicule in case of remarriage. Others could not break out of the stereotype image of woman renouncing the mortal pleasures after the death of her husband. However some felt that times have changed and if the prospective groom agrees to accept the widow with her siblings, then the possibility could be explored. This shows that some change in attitude albeit slow has been happening in their traditional mindset. However, widow remarriage, contrary to popular belief to some extent does take place in the lower strata of the society where the influence of Brahminism is less. Questions have been raised about the plight of the remarried widows as indicated in past researches (Chen & Dreze, Mari Bhat) but a discussion on this is outside the ambit of the present study. But the most important fact of the matter is the social acceptance of the concept of widow remarriage by a small section of the populace albeit very slowly.

Girl arranges widowed mother's wedding in West Bengal

Kolkata - Overcoming family and social pressures, a teenaged daughter got her widowed mother, in her mid-30s, married to a close relative, winning accolades from social activists in West Bengal. Deepa Varma, the widow, married her

brother-in-law Shambhunath at the Kalighat temple here Sunday. Deepa's daughter Shilpa, 17, took the initiative and arranged her mother's marriage with Shambhu. She triumphed over the social and family pressures, by speaking to her family and making them accept the otherwise unconventional match. Deepa's husband and Shambhu's elder brother, Pradip, died three years ago. Social activists in West Bengal are seeing in the marriage a new trend of permissiveness. 'It's an exceptional case when a daughter has understood the psyche of her widowed mother and allowed her a second marriage with her own uncle... The girl has shown her big-heartedness and it is just an effect of her liberal thinking,' writer and socio-cultural activist Miratun Nahar told IANS. Former state Women's Commission member Nahar said: 'It shows that the girl respects her mother's freedom as an individual and she has given some importance to her (mother's) feelings.'

(Source: IANS, February 24th, 2009)



Lost in the crowd - Tarapith



Yet so poignant - Kalighat

The temple economy provides living for a substantial number of widows

An interesting fact that emerged from the study is although the women receive no financial assistance from the family members, almost 60% of them are in touch with their families. A significant number of them periodically visit their homes and provide financial support to the members especially children, grandchildren etc although they nurture a deep-rooted anguish at the discrimination faced in their homes. This could probably be attributed an ever embracing ever forgiving attitude of a mother (or a woman) whose magnanimity for her siblings in spite all ill behaviours and bitter experiences define the ultimate pinnacle of motherhood. Alternatively it could also be said that socio-cultural deprivation of a woman right from her days of birth had conditioned her to accept the ignominy from her near and dear ones. In the same way, a woman has been socio-culturally conditioned to decorate her body with jewels or colored cloths to please her husband or forego these material benefits and suppress her innate desires in his absence thereby shattering her psyche and mental framework. This could also be looked as a archetypical example of social conditioning that homogenizes a large amount of people into a certain distinctive

social mould. The social status of a widow is nothing but a sociological phenomenological process of inheriting tradition and gradual cultural transmutation passed down through previous generations. Manifestations of this social conditioning for the widows have already been elaborated in the beginning of the chapter. Before summing up the social status of widow, another key issue that drives them is the sense of insecurity. The wave of nameless, faceless “white rainbows” appearing in the nook and corner of Nabadwip who stand apart from the mainstream population for the slowness of their gait, their apologetic presence and forlorn look live under constant fear of proper cremation of their bodies under religious rites in the absence of lack of identities. Yet one shopkeeper narrated that a few months ago, a widow was dying on the streets of Nabadwip but even in her deathbed, she refused to divulge her residential address lest being sent there. This conspicuous paradox in their lives, the dilemma between ‘nature and ‘nurture’ i.e. concerning the relative importance of an individual's innate qualities (“nature”, i.e. nativism, or innateness) versus personal experiences (“nurture”, i.e. empiricism or behaviorism) in determining or causing individual differences in physical and behavioral traits conjures up the status of a destitute widow in modern Indian society.

Widow suffers public apathy

Berhampore: Who will help a widow in rural Bengal with three kids and no money? For Mrs Dipali Ghosh and her three children, the answer is no one.

After her husband was killed in a motorbike accident in 2006, her in-laws denied her shelter. They drove her out along with her three children. Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) denied her husband's death claim to the tune of Rs 1 lakh and the state government did not give her any aid under widow welfare scheme. The local school did not take in her kids, the panchayat refused to ensure her weekly ration and she was denied job of a domestic help, since people thought her kids to be too much of a nuisance. The only valuable thing she possesses is a voter ID card issued by the Election Commission of India.

During a visit to her temporary shelter at her blind father’s residence in Murutia village in Nadia district, her children were found lying naked, while the widow was trying to ward off the mosquitoes with a fan. With no clothes to wear, her six-year-old eldest son lay groaning with a broken arm and so did her five-year-old daughter with multiple head injuries. She was hurt while playing. Sitting beside them in a corner was Dipali’s father who cannot walk.

The 23-year-old widow, Dipali Ghosh, said: “I look after the cattle that belongs to my brothers for which they give me and my kids some food. My brothers are daily wagers and I am nothing more than a financial burden to them. They beat me up and my children almost daily but I have to bear with all this because they are my brothers. Moreover, my father does not want to desert me. My father

thinks that I would be safe as far as I am with him since I could be exploited because of my less age.

“Some people told me to get my children admitted to the local primary school so that they can have the mid-day meal but the school does not want to take in my children,” she broke down while narrating her tale.

Her husband, Amar Ghosh, was killed in a road accident near his residence at Baruipara near Shikarpur of Karimpur-I block in Nadia on 18 January, 2006 and his LIC policy (No. 484845702) is hardly accessible to his ill-fated wife.

Her blind father, Mr Yudhisthir Ghosh, said: “When someone comes, I keep him waiting outside till my daughter wears her sari after drying. I am thankful to god who made me blind so that I don’t have to see how my daughter deals with such disgrace.”

(Source: The Statesman, 11th November, 2007)

Widow driven to death - Elders ask woman to leave village without children

Beldanga (Murshidabad), April 22: A young widow who became pregnant after a relationship with a local youth allegedly committed suicide last night after a kangaroo court let off the man with a fine and asked her to leave the village without her two children. Samina Bewa’s headless torso was found off the railway tracks near Beldanga station in Murshidabad. The 30-year-old woman lived in nearby Shitalpara with mother-in-law Afroza, a five-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter. Her husband Majirul died five years ago.

Village elders held the shalishi (reconciliation) meeting after they came to know Samina was expecting.

They asked Samir Sheikh, 25, to pay Rs 25,000 to Samina and ordered her out of the village within a day, leaving behind her children.

Murshidabad superintendent of police B.L. Meena said: “The case (Samina’s death) is now with the Government Railway Police but we will also look into it keeping the court order in mind.”

Samir did not even pay the fine slapped on him. He only promised to deposit the money with the village elders later, said a resident of Shitalpara, about 180km from Calcutta.

Hearing about the death, one of those who sat in jury at the kangaroo court admitted his mistake.

“We have done injustice to the girl. At the meeting, no one even proposed that Samir and Samina be asked to get married. Had we done that, this tragedy could have been avoided. I was one of judges and can’t shrug off responsibility,” said Asai Mondal, 60, an affluent farmer. Asai added that the verdict was reached by consensus and he was party to it.

Mother-in-law Afroza, too, said she would have been happy had Samir and Samina been asked to get married. “My grandchildren wouldn’t have lost their

mother,” the 60-year-old widow said. The children are too young to comprehend the sudden turn of events.

Seven of the eight men who had conducted the “court” are rich farmers, each owning over six acres. The other is the village grocer. All of them are still in the village but police haven’t picked up any of them, not even for questioning.

No one is likely to lodge a complaint against the village elders, either. Samina’s younger brother Sherful said he was ashamed of her conduct. “We have lost our face,” said Sherful, 27, a small farmer at nearby Debkundu village.

(Source: The Telegraph, 22nd April 2009)

4.6 Health Issues:

4.6.1 Main Place for Treatment:

Main place for treatment	Res(n)
Govt. hospitals/clinics	137
Health clinics of religious institutions	32
Private doctors	12
Others	19
Total	200

The most popular place of treatment of the widows is Government hospitals and clinics for the very simple reason that they cannot afford to bear the cost of treatment by private practitioners or private hospitals/clinics. A key problem of widows is the lack of supply of medicines at the Government hospitals for which they are forced to buy medicine from the market. Many widows also take the service of the health clinics run by the religious authorities like in Patharchapri.

4.6.2 Status of Health:

Have health issue at present	Res(n)
Yes	177
No	23
Total	200

The specific health problems faced by older widows are eyes, orthopedic problems, back strains and nutrition and in some cases asthma and other respiratory problems. Symptoms of many geriatric ailments like osteoporosis etc were witnessed amongst the widows. Personal hygiene of the widows living off the ashram is deplorable while those living in the ashram are somewhat better. Mental health is neglected in all the cases. For serious health issues and terminal health problem, the widows of Kolkata go to the Government hospitals while the

widows in the rural belt rely on the local Government health centres which offers not much scope for remedy.

Sudha Mondal (name changed) lives in a Bhajanashram in Nabadwip and is entrusted to singing Bhajans by playing cymbals or banging metallic bowls on the floor.



Missionaries of Charity clinic for terminal patients - Kalighat



KMC Health Clinic - Kalighat

4.7 Living Condition in Bhajanshram:

Comments	Yes	No	Total
Living in Bhajanashrams	15	185	200
Free accommodation	15	0	15
Ashram provide adequate livelihood	15	0	15
Have any feeling of insecurity	4	11	15
Ever been abused physically/emotionally	2	13	15

The living condition of the Bhajanshrams was basic but more or less satisfactory. The ashrams provide adequate livelihood but there is no provision for any vocational training. The Nabadwip Bhajanashram is non-residential, only 10-12 widows are kept to continue the 24 hours non-stop thread of bhajan singing. The widows interviewed opined that had accepted the life of mendicancy which they felt is their only option at this ripe age. A frugal lunch is served to all the widows who assemble in the morning for bhajan and lunch is only served to those who sing the bhajan continuously for 4 hours. In the evening, 40 widows are provided with rice and pulses. However the ashram is meant exclusively for elderly widows and do not serve the younger ones. As mentioned in Chapter III, Govindabari, Nabadwip provides accommodation and lunch to the widows against a monthly charge. The infrastructure is basic and the vegetarian lunch

too is spartan but barring a few, the widows are more or less satisfied with the arrangement. Here it was seen that some widows who have really renounced the mortal world and prefer to live like a mendicant live here. For the others, it has been a case of unceremonious dumping by the children and relatives who want to purge the widows out of their respective families. Sometimes it so happens, that after paying the dues for few months, the relatives put an abrupt end to sending the remittance.

Asima Giri (name changed) lives in Gobindabari, Nabadwip. Although she hails from a middle class family with no apparent economic problems, she couldn't stay at her home due to frequent tiffs with her daughter-in-laws. Afterwards, her sons unanimously decided to keep her in an old age home and chose Gobindabari because of its location in the sacred town of Nabadwip. Initially they regularly sent the dues of the ashram but after sometimes it became infrequent and ultimately stopped. Frequent reminder sent to her home address remained unanswered and a harsh reality dawned on Asima that her sons have abandoned her. However she has a strong self-esteem and refused to have free lunch at the Ashram. She started doing menial job there in lieu of the monthly boarding and lodging charges.

The Adyapeeth Matri ashram is not a Bhajanashram in true sense of its term but it does provide residential facilities to the destitute widows.

Abandoned finds home

Five days after being abandoned by her family members, 73-year-old Mira Moitra found strangers rallying to her side on Friday. Turned out of her brother's homes, the old lady who can't walk without crutches found a new home in an abode of peace.

"I am not alone. So many people are with me. I want to live", smiled Mira, clad in a new sari at her new-found address: the old-age home of Dakshineswar Ramkrishna Sangha Adyapeeth.

The organisation's general secretary, Mural Bhai, said: "She can live here as long she wants. We can support her and also bear the cost of the treatment for her spinal injuries."

But Mira, so used to the taunts of her loved ones, wants to do her bit for her benefactors. "I will work in return of what the Sangha has offered me," she stressed.

(Source: The Telegraph)



Meeting the main functionary of Nabadwip
Bhajanshram



Women performing bhajan at Nabadwip
Bhajanshram

The life of the widows is a valiant story of struggle for existence in spite of being shunned by their near and dear. This struggle is even more poignant for those who are in the in their days of sunset, afflicted by diseases and waiting for a silent death unheard and unsung. Yet, their struggle etches out a vivid celebration of life, an amazing thought that a woman who always maintained a dependent status could still lead an independent existence at the later stage of her life although the option was forced on her rather than being an informed choice. Borrowing from Ted Hughes, it can be observed, "Death also is trying to be life" to describe their conditions. This death is not much a physical death but more a social death and a cultural death that was proclaimed by the society which they are trying to cope up with their innovative survival strategies.

Beggar donates plot for school, babus drag feet

Nabadwip (Nadia), Oct. 12 2008: Seventy-five-year-old Shantilata Biswas, who begs on the streets for her meals, donated in January her only possession, a piece of land in Nabadwip town, for a new building of the local primary school.

The Nadia Primary School Council took the land but did not do any thing with it.

The school at Rajbanshipara – about 100km from Calcutta – for which the three-cottah plot was given has been running from a rented house for 40 years. The building is crumbling and its classrooms have no benches. A few hundred students sit on the floor. Headmistress Debi Kar had approached many in the area for land to build a proper school. "But there was no response. Then, in January, Shantilata Devi came forward. We have requested the council to construct the school as soon as possible. But I can't explain the delay," she said. Class II student Subal Rajbanshi said: "On rainy days, teachers ask us not to come to school because of leaking roofs."

Shantilata decided to donate her land when she heard that the school authorities were thinking of shutting it down because of the condition of the building. A widow at 13, she left behind her 20 acres in Barishal – in erstwhile East Pakistan – in 1947 and crossed over with relatives and other refugees. “My husband was a rich farmer, but he died two months after my marriage.”

In Nadia, she bought the 3-cottah plot, built a thatched house and earned a living as a domestic help. “Now I don’t have energy to work and so I beg on the streets,” she said. Before donating the land, she spoke to an old age home, which agreed to provide her accommodation. But the woman refuses to move from her thatched house before she sees “some sign” that the construction of the school is about to begin. She would not let others grab her vacant plot. Had she sold the 3 cottahs instead of donating it, Shan- tilata would have made Rs 6 lakh.

She had expected work on the school to begin as soon as she gave the land. When nothing happened in six months, she wrote to the council as well as the local school inspector, urging them to begin construction. “Sir, I am a poor widow and struggled for many years against various odds. I was born in Bangladesh and came to Nadia after partition leaving acres of land behind. I was pained to see small children sitting on the floor and studying and getting drenched because of the leaking roofs of the school,” she wrote to Nadia primary school council chairman Bibhash Biswas. “I have made arrangements to shift to an old age home... but many months have passed since I donated the land and nothing has happened. Please see to it that my last wish is fulfilled,” she added. Biswas today said the council had to borrow Rs 3 lakh from the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan funds. “So it took time. Work will soon begin.”

(Source: The Telegraph, 12th October, 2008)

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

4.4 Conclusions:

The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. If on one hand she is at the peak of ladder of success in many spheres of public life, on the other she suffers a silent social death everyday bound by moribund patriarchal customs and traditions in a semi-feudal society. The silent deprivation of the widows have occasionally caught the imagination of the policy makers but has been largely remained out of the periphery of the societal conscience (a key reason could be the absence of a well defined civil society in the country) because it is solely a woman's experience. The fact of the matter remains that a widow's position in Indian society cutting across socio-cultural or religious barrier has remained precarious since medieval days. Although the law makers and the religious police eulogized the Hindu widows as "Devis" it has remained a sheer hypocrisy. The famous Bengali litterateur Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, in his article, "Value of a Woman" had remarked that "*This pious Devi is debarred from attending a wedding ceremony lest the bride becomes a 'Devi' seeing her face. This Devi is only called to cook the ritualistic junk of a mourning ceremony. This is the epitome of piety of the so-called Devis.*" Moving forward to twenty first century, urbanisation, modernisation and globalisation have led to changes in economic structure, erosion of societal values and the weakening of social institutions such as the joint family. This has exacerbated the position of the widows in a family and once she becomes a 'burden' of the family, no time is lost to declare her a 'persona non-grata' and suitable steps are taken to eject her from the family environment. In this context, the study has attempted to understand the nature and extent of the social and economic pressures that are impinging on intergenerational relationships in this rapidly unsettling change in familial values and tries to frame a broad policy and set of recommendations towards improving the wellbeing of India's senior citizens of fairer sex.

4.5 Summary Findings:

Demography:

- Majority of the respondents belonged to the SC, ST and other backward communities. Barring a few, most of them have identity proof with them.
- Overwhelming majority of them were illiterate.
- 87% of them were completely illiterate while only 6% of them could barely write their names.

- 92% of the respondents were from rural origin while 8% of them came from the urban/sub-urban areas. While the overwhelming majority were Indians, a few Bangladeshis were found in Nabadwip who came during 1971 or afterwards following communal riots.
- 84% of the women have migrated from other places of West Bengal while the rest were locals.

Socio-economic Conditions:

- Barring a few (approx. 8%), the widows live in rented accommodations (which they share), precincts of the temples/ashrams/mazars, on the streets, pavements, shops etc. Needless to say that the living condition of all of them deplorable.
- Begging is the key source of income for almost 79% of the respondents followed by menial jobs. Only few are exclusively engaged in singing bhajans.
- The late husbands of the interviewed women were either agricultural labourers, marginal farmers or ran small business. Some (10%) were completely unemployed.
- Pandas and clergy play a significant supportive role in some cases while in some cases they remain totally indifferent to their plight. Some accusations of rude behaviour also trickled in.
- The key expectations from the Government are provisions of pension (more than 90%) and special housing facilities (80%)

Marital Life & Widowhood:

- Almost 100% of the respondents were married below 18 years of age and there existed a huge age difference between the women and their spouse. For this reason, they had been abused physically as well as sexually and emotionally. This has also resulted in early widowhood.
- 87% of the respondents felt that their nuptial life was unhappy and the main reasons were abject poverty, physical and mental torture and other symptoms of dysfunctional family structure.
- Only a handful of husbands could leave behind some property. However majority of the widows were not made a part of the decision making process about the property in spite of their rightful share.

Social Status:

- The primary reason for migration is economic (approx. 55%) followed by social issues like ill treatment by family members, desertions and being ostracized from the family. Very few (6%) have come for devotional purpose and they were seen only in Nabadwip.

- A significant number of these widows were driven out of their homes by the in-laws after the demise of their husbands.
- The treatment by the family members worsened after widowhood when a woman had to suffer the double trauma of being a woman as well as being a widow.
- The push factors for migration of women are extreme poverty, gender violence, apathy towards widows and loosening of family bonding while pull factors of the religious places were assurance of a meal, some basic shelter and income in the form of alms.
- There is a substantial number of destitute women with husbands, deserted women (both by husbands as well as partners), or ex-sex workers who live along with the widows and the entire entity appears as a homogenous group.

Health Issues:

- The most popular place of treatment of the widows is Government hospitals and clinics, the reason being they are either free or have to pay a token sum.
- Apart from common diseases, symptoms of many geriatric ailments were witnessed amongst the widows. Concept and practice of personal health and hygiene were extremely poor and patients suffering from mental trauma were basically left to fend for themselves.

4.6 Recommendations:

- The benefits of Government sponsored pension schemes (both widow as well as old age) are yet to trickle to these widow population due to technical difficulties. At present pension can only be sanctioned to widows living in their native places. As the widows of our study have moved in from other areas, they are being deprived of this Government support although it is they who deserve it most. For this reason the existing pension schemes need to be re-drafted to include a clause keeping in mind the demography and the mobility of these widows.
- There is a need to provide alternative housing to the widows who live in makeshift shanties, streets, verandahs etc. Initiation of Swadhar project will help in providing accommodation, improvement in skill building, providing health care measures and connecting them into the various activities of the temple like making garlands, incense sticks etc. This will be an effort to bring them into the mainstream of the society. Alternatively shelter homes could be organized and basic weekly ration provided as widows go out in the morning to the temples/mazars/ashrams and have their lunch there.
- Zero balance bank accounts should be opened for the widows so that they could properly save from their meager earnings which could simultaneously act as their pension account.

- Short stay homes for younger widows and the abandoned women should be established where proper vocational training (apart from basic education) needs to be imparted based on the temple economy. A proper feasibility study needs to be conducted in this respect. However no elaborate vocational training programme for the aged population is needed because of their reasoned unwillingness to adopt an alternative livelihood at the fag end of their lives. This unwillingness stemming from their physical and mental handicap can also be explained as reaching the 'natural limits' in the learning curve whence no further useful learning is possible.
- Sensitize the Panchayats about the provisions of Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 especially the obligations of the siblings towards their parents/grand parents as well as the right of a senior citizen to claim maintenance for her near ones. Apart from that, the procedure of claiming maintenance needs to be discussed at the Gram Sansad level.
- Information dissemination on availability of widow's pension, amount of pension and how to access it should be intensified through innovative IEC campaigns by the Panchayats.
- Social conditioning plays a great role in the deprivation of the widows. This conditioning is so strong that the widows see themselves as inauspicious. They internalize their victimized status which results in very low self-esteem. A properly integrated counseling facility is needed in these shelter homes keeping in mind their geriatric issues as well as psycho-social disorders to rebuild their self esteem.

The study clearly illustrates that there are close links between the positions of the widows in the society and the entire gamut of patriarchal relations like patrilineal inheritance, patrilocal residence, remarriage norms and the gender division of labour. The cause of the widow is a just part of the much bigger collage of struggle against gender bias and inequalities. Taking effective action to address the problems of the widows should include more secure land rights for the women and affirmative social action on the part of the state.

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