



An Unfortunate Journey of Conversion from Widowhood to Beggars: A Theoretical Review of Holy Temple Town, Nabadwip, Nadia, West Bengal

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Abstract

The primary intention of this study is to draw attention to the economic, social, and psychological conditions of poor widows and their conversion into beggars in the holy town of Nabadwip in Nadia District, West Bengal. The study aims to collect detailed information on living conditions as well as their social, economic, emotional, and financial needs to consolidate its strategic interventions for the widow's beggars. Both in Hinduism and Islam, for example, charity to beggars is required for all people of faith. However, besides the fact that 'beggary' has its roots in religious mendicancy, it has its socio-economic ramifications, and that has made 'beggary' a major social problem of the 20th century. The study is largely based on the various reports, reviews, literature, and papers on the status of widowhood and mendicancy in India. The objective of the study is to find out the unfortunate journey of the conversion of widows, particularly elderly widows, into beggars in the holy town of Nabadwip in Nadia District, West Bengal, and develop a long-term strategy and perspective plan to address their problem related to livelihood patterns.

Key Words: *Widowhood, Beggars, Livelihood patterns, Holy town*

Introduction:

The structure of our patriarchal Indian society incorporates the status of widowhood. The structure of Indian society is predominantly patriarchal, where a woman does not enjoy equal rights with men, and her condition becomes precarious after the death of her spouse. Every step she took further reinforced her negative status as a widow. Most notably, in a patriarchal society such as India, a woman's transition into widowhood following her husband's death carries a social stigma. Despite the modernization of society's living standards, the conditions of widows remain depriving. Most conservative families consider widows to be liabilities.

As a widow, society relegates her to the periphery, often cropping her hair short, forcing her to wear a single white sari for the rest of her life, restricting her access to meat, fish, or spices, preventing her from attending religious or social functions, and robbing her of all rights over her deceased husband's property. They come to religious places to spend the rest of their lives in societies where the husband is typically the sole provider; his death can plunge his family into poverty, and many of the hardships faced by widows and their children are due to customs and attitudes towards widows and the lack of sufficient support systems. In the 'holy' cities of Vrindavan (Mathura), Kashi (Varanasi), and Nabadwip (Gupta Vrindaban),

certain sections of the Hindu community, particularly in the state of West Bengal, abandon their widows, forcing them into prostitution or forcing them to beg on the streets for survival. The condition of widows in West Bengal is no better than in the rest of India, where a significant number of widows are neglected and marginalized. Many of them frequent the holy towns of Nabadwip, Tarapith, etc., the precincts of temples like Kalighat and Dakshineswar in Kolkata, or the numerous 'Mazaars (graveyards of Sufi saints)' scattered across the state, where they regularly receive free food. A new generation of text books has sharpened this idea.

There are 4,13,670 beggars—2.2 lakh males and 1.91 lakh females—in the country. West Bengal, with 81,244 beggars, topped the list, followed by 65,835 in Uttar Pradesh, 30,218 in Andhra Pradesh, 29,723 in Bihar, and 28,695 in Madhya Pradesh. Incidentally, in Assam, Manipur, and West Bengal, female beggars outnumbered their male counterparts. In many societies, the economic position of widows is an important social issue. The present research paper is an attempt to analyse the condition of poor widows in the holy town of Nabadwip, which is situated at the picturesque confluence of the holy rivers Bhagirathi and Jalangi in the Nadia district of West Bengal. The structure of our patriarchal Indian society incorporates the status of widowhood. The structure of Indian society is

predominantly patriarchal, where a woman does not enjoy equal rights with men, and her condition becomes precarious after the death of her spouse. Every step she took further reinforced her negative status as a widow. Most notably, in a patriarchal society such as India, a woman's transition into widowhood following her husband's death carries a social stigma. Despite the modernization of society's living standards, the conditions of widows remain depriving. Most conservative families consider widows to be liabilities. As a widow, society relegates her to the periphery, often cropping her hair short, forcing her to wear a single white sari for the rest of her life, restricting her access to meat, fish, or spices, preventing her from attending religious or social functions, and robbing her of all rights over her deceased husband's property. They come to religious places to spend the rest of their lives in societies where the husband is typically the sole provider; his death can plunge his family into poverty, and many of the hardships faced by widows and their children are due to customs and attitudes towards widows and the lack of sufficient support systems. In the 'holy' cities of Vrindavan (Mathura), Kashi (Varanasi), and Nabadwip (Gupta Vrindaban), certain sections of the Hindu community, particularly in the state of West Bengal, abandon their widows, forcing them into prostitution or forcing them to beg on the streets for survival.

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Objectives of the study:

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To identify the causative factors related to the migration of widows to various religious centres, its pattern, and its route
2. To develop a practical understanding of their

present social, economic, and health conditions

3. To study the lives of the widows and their livelihood as beggars in religious places
4. To develop a long-term strategy and perspective plan to address their problems and sufferings.

Methods and Materials:

The study relies on primary data collected through a field survey in the holy town of Nabadwip. We selected the areas using stratified random sampling techniques. We decided to collect data for this inquiry from different wards of Nabadwip Municipality due to time and cost constraints. Thus, we selected 300 poor widows for the survey, out of the 180 who resided in various wards of Nabadwip Municipal Area.

The current analysis considers various socio-economic development parameters to assess the socio-economic status of widows in religious places, their transition to beggars, their employment rate, and their per capita income. These indicators fall into five categories: population characteristics, literacy, employment, income, and household infrastructural facilities.

We identified the locations through a survey of secondary data, government records, and records from the Math/Ashram Authority, among other sources

Primary Data Sources:

We framed a semi-structured questionnaire to collect both quantitative and qualitative information from a selected sample of respondents in various places of Nabadwip, aiming to capture all relevant information about the widows' situation. We conducted in-depth interviews in the study areas. We collected the primary data to assess the socio-economic condition of the widows, the challenges they face in terms of livelihood and living conditions, social stigma, etc.

Secondary Data Sources:

1. Officials of Ashrama, Bhajanashrams, and Mazars
2. Priests in temples
3. Local Club members and NGOs
4. Govt. officials and police.

Study Area:

The ancient temple town of Nabadwip spans an area of 11.66 sq. km. Nabadwip was historically the erstwhile capital of Bengal during the 12th century B.C., which was under the sovereignty of Lakshman Sen, the last Hindu sovereign of Bengal. The town is most legendarily noted for being the birthplace of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, who started the famed Gaudiya Vaishnavism movement at this place. Nabadwip has always been renowned for its rich cultural and educational past. It was and still is a very sacrosanct and reputed seat of learning, which has produced many notable scholars and pundits since time immemorial in the fields of law, literature,

astronomy, poetry, grammar, and theology, respectively. Nabadwip is a land of temples. Numerous assortments of temples pepper the town, vividly portraying the incidents of "Bhagavath Leela" that occurred here centuries ago.

This archipelago boasts of nearly 150 temples. Down the ages, Nabadwip, the Gour Gangar Desh, has alluvial soil and lies on the banks of the River Hooghly. This river is known locally as Bhaghirathi. Nabadwip is located at the confluence of the River Bhaghirathi and the River Jhalangi. The River Bhaghirathi has changed course, and Nabadwip now lies on its western banks. Earlier, it used to lie on the eastern banks with the remaining portions of the district of Nadia. Floods are very common in this area due to river silting. Arsenic contamination is present in the groundwater today. Nabadwip, located in the Nadia district, is both a city and a municipality. The years 1486–1533 saw the birth of the legendary Chaitanyadeb at Nabadwip Prachin Mayapur. Thus, Nabadwip, or the Gour Gangar Desh, was a famous place in history. Here, significant festivals such as "Rash Utsav" and "Pat Purnima," "Rash Kali Puja," and "Shakta Rash" take place.

In 1904, the government had taken over the municipality. The Nabadwip municipality had a total area of 5.74 square kilometres in 1931, but it later expanded. In 1964, the total area of the town was 11.56 sq. km. The number of wards has now increased to 24 from 6. There are almost 500 temples in town. Nabadwip has earned recognition as a temple town.

Results & Discussions

Status of Widows:

People always explain the widow's journey to these holy places of pilgrimage as religious in nature: "it is her desire to spend the rest of their lives in peace, serving God," or "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 pilgrimage sites, hoping for a better life. Before they can realise 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 survey report, the condition of widows living in Nabadwip is very poor. Most of these age-old widows work as helping hands in households and ashrams, as they are illiterate and do not have any particular skills. Most of these destitute women's main occupation is begging and singing bhajans and kirtans in front of temples or ashrams in Nabadwip, which are run by trusts funded by rich people.

Socio-Economic Condition of Widow Beggars:

Nabadwip is the birthplace of Sri

Chaitanya. There are numerous temples located in each ward of the town. The case study highlights the socio-economic plight of widows from different parts of the country. Many pilgrims from around the world come to visit this holy place, Nabadwip, "The Birth Place of Lord Sri Chaitanya." Mainly in the morning and evening, the maximum number of pilgrims come to the temple to offer their worship, and at the same time, charity to beggars is offered by the pilgrims on the faith as an offering to God. Every morning and evening, widows come to the temple and pray by pronouncing "Hare Krishna Hare Ram." Most pilgrims visit famous temple areas such as Poramatala, Mahaprabhu Bari, Shyam Kunja-Radhakunj Mandir, Sri Chaitanya Janmosthan Mandir, Govind Bari, Samaj Bari, and Gouriya Math, where they aid over 500 widow beggars.

Another well-known place in this holy town is Nabadwip Bhajan Arshram, where widows and destitute women offer nonstop, 24-hour prayers to Lord Krishna Vagavan. Every day, the Nabadwip Bhajan Ashram welcomes 500 to 2500 destitute women, primarily widows, who come to pray for 24 hours. The ashram only permits entry to women, especially widows, who are over 50 years of age. The ashram permits a very poor, destitute young widow as a special case. Widows offered their Bhajan Kirtan by singing "*Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Ram Hare Ram, Ram Ram Hare Hare*" inside the Bhajan Ashram in Nabadwip. In the Bhajan Ashram, widows raise their arms when singing Bhajan Kirtan. One of the leaders of the Widows is singing Bhajan, but mostly she is trying to push the other one to sing louder and louder. At the end of prayers, widows leave the ashram. A representative from the Bhajan Arshram Authority distributed tokens to the other widows at the entrance of the Nabadwip Bhajan Ashram to verify their attendance at the singing and prayers, thereby granting them access to a complimentary meal. During a morning prayer, a minimum of 500 and a maximum of 2500 widows will receive an equal amount of free lunch, including cooked rice, dal, and vegetables, as well as some uncooked rice and dal for dinner after the 5 hours (from 6 a.m. to 11 a.m.) singing session. The Nabadwip Bhajan Ashram and Samaj Bari periodically distribute special clothes and blankets.

Some other math and ashrams, such as Sri Sri Sri Gobinda Jiur Mandir, Sri Sri Chaitanya Saraswat Goudiya Math, Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mission Ashram, Sri Sri Sonar Gourango Mandir, Dhameswar Sri Sri Gourango Mahapravu Mandir, Sri Sri Samaj Bari Ashram, and Sri Sri Chaitanya Mahapravur Janmosthan Mondir, also provide residential homes to widows as an alternative to monthly fees, and comparatively affluent widows with the means to do so reside in these ashrams. For

this reason, they were not included in the study. However, another ashram, Sri Sri Gobinda Jiur Mondir, accommodates approximately 17–20 widows for a monthly fee of Rs 1800–2000. After shelter, there is also lunch, while the widows manage breakfast and dinner on their own. Some ashrams, like Nabadwip Samajbari, organise bhogs for the devotees during lunchtime and distribute the left-overs to the widows.

The comparatively affluent widows permanently lived inside the temple, and they engaged in various activities related to worshipping Lord Sri Krishna. The temple provides them with a monthly stipend of Rs. 800, along with a complimentary meal. An in-depth interview revealed that the family members disagree with taking any responsibility for these helpless widows who have lost their husband, who is not able to earn for his family.

They are socially, financially, and legally marginalized. On one hand, they have lost their companions, and on the other hand, they go up against isolation of distinctive sorts and degrees. Tragically, society views widowhood as a sign of disaster and terrible fortune, and people often use derogatory terms like "husband eater" against them. In India, people don't like a widow crossing the way in front of them when they are beginning a journey. In a more conservative perspective of Hindu tradition, irrespective of age, widowed women leave their colourful saris, embellishments, and they shave their heads. These are the traditional rules imposed on widows, such as restricting their access to non-vegetarian diets due to the belief that non-vegetarian food enhances sexual interactions. In India, the mortality rates among ladies are 85% higher than among widows as a result of the unavailability of basic amenities and societal services.

Many reports have also pointed out that many of the widows suffer from tuberculosis, asthma, and various skin diseases. Because of filthy living conditions, many women suffer from a variety of ailments. Lack of sanitation also causes stomach ailments such as diarrhea and dysentery. Their hair and clothing are full of lice, and their tiny living spaces are very dirty. The State Commission for Women, West Bengal, published a report in 1999–2000, stating that the extremely fragile physical, mental, and financial state of these women exposes them to various forms of exploitation. In their places of residence, those who control these places not only charge exorbitant rents, but also threaten and bully them continually.

Conclusion & Suggestions:

The study's overall analysis reveals that the unfortunate journey of poor widows, particularly age-old destitute widows who have converted to beggars, has a very low level of demographic status. The analysis of the literacy rate among beggars

indicates that the Nabadwip of the Nadia district experiences a low level of literacy. The analysis of socio-economic status reveals that beggars in the central part of the town experienced a medium level of socio-economic status, while the peripheral areas witnessed a low level of socio-economic status. Socially cognizant individuals must evaluate the correct condition of dowagers living in these devout places, and discoveries have revealed that they were really compelled to live in despicable conditions. The widow beggars of the Nabadwip primarily rely on begging for their survival, given their extremely low income and high dependency ratios. They have very limited access to educational opportunities, as well as other modern household amenities and assets. On the other hand, there should be an efficient implementation and diffusion of all the social and welfare schemes for development launched by the Government of India for poverty alleviation, employment generation, the development of educational and health infrastructure, basic amenities and facilities, etc. Surely, these measures will bring a light of hope for the socio-economic development of this marginalised population (beggars) in the holy places of Nabadwip in the Nadia district.

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