

Deprivation, Renunciation and Social-Self

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People in India, specially the Hindus, have been living with the numerous types of customs, cultural practices, value systems, etc. supported by their religio-philosophical traditions. One such custom of committing *sati* by widows of all age-groups in the past and later on observing strictly the widowhood particularly among the upper castes Hindus have traditionally been placed in the high esteem. These Hindu widows were required to observe celibacy, spend their entire time in worshipping the gods and goddesses, adhere strictly to one-time vegetarian meal in small quantity, have restricted interaction with others, etc., besides foregoing the practice of cultural symbols of a married woman. Their presence was regarded as inauspicious on the auspicious occasions. In fact, they were required to live with the numerous types of socio-cultural disabilities in both their affinal and natal families. They were, thus, deprived materially and non-materially or emotionally. They were also supposed to live a life of renouncer or an ascetic but their such renunciation or asceticism was as an inherent part of their life, and not socially and religiously recognized.

This situation was more distinctively visible among the upper castes Hindu widows in the traditional society of the undivided Bengal. A few studies have suggested that the upper castes Bengali women happen to be more religious-minded. There has been the practice among the elderly men and women, including widows, to visit the religious places. But this was more so among the Bengali women in the past. It is also an undisputed fact that amongst all the Hindu religious places, the city of Kashi or Benaras (Banaras) or the present day Varanasi has enjoyed the highest prestige as it has been regarded the city of Lord Vishwanath. Such importance of the city had attracted the people even from Bengal since the ancient period. The city of Varanasi had also been known for the *Kashivas* which simply means the elderly people from all walks of life coming to the city and living there either temporarily or permanently in the hope of getting *moksha* or *mukti* (liberation) from taking rebirth after their death. This tradition had also attracted a number of the Bengali widows to come to Varanasi city, live permanently there and die peacefully in the hope of getting *moksha* or *mukti*. This had suited more to the upper castes Bengali families not only for getting rid off their widows, including young ones, but also depriving them of their maintenance, their inheritance of property of their deceased husbands or of their share in the family property under both the customary law of *Dayabhag* and a number of favorable Acts adopted later on.

It is also widely known that the undivided Bengal was the pioneering province (presidency and later on state) for carrying out reforms against a number of social evils such as *sati*, child marriage, ban on widow-remarriage and the various types of

superstitions prevalent, especially among the women-folks, in the Hindu society since the early 18th century. During the early 19th century, the upper castes Hindus, specially the Bhadrals, started educating their women including girls first through informal institutions such as *zenana* education and later through the formal educational institutions. One of its latent functions education the women, including widows, not only in participating in the various socio - religious activities outside their homes but also forming their selfhood social- self of certain type. This had influenced even the Bengal men and women already living in Varanasi city. A few Bengali men and women, including widows, had participated in the national freedom movement also organized during the early decades of the 20th century in the city.

The Present Study

The present study has inquired into the nature of both - the material and non-material deprivations, the forced and voluntary renunciations, and the formation of selfhood and social-self among the Bengali widows living in Varanasi city. We have also analysed the purpose of their coming, either voluntarily or under compulsion, to Varanasi city, besides examining the nature and types of asceticism or renunciation practiced by them. Besides enquiring into their hope or aspiration for attaining moksha, which is imaginary in nature, we have tried even to explain the nature and type of formation of selfhood as well as social-self among the Bengali widows living in the city.

As a large majority of the elderly Bengali widows living in the Varanasi city since pre-partition and partition times do not get any substantive or even meager material and emotional support from their both affinal and natal families, they are mostly dependent on some sorts of social security provided by the state under the old-age pension scheme, the householders, the pilgrims, etc. We have, therefore, finally tried to find out the nature and types as well as adequacy of social security available to them. Keeping in view their meager needs, we have done this to know whether these social security measures have helped them in the formation of their selfhood or social-self in brief, following are the main objective of the present study -

1. To find out the various forms of deprivation of the Bengali widows living in the Varanasi city.
2. To enquire into the specific contexts in which they opted for some sort of asceticism or renunciation; and, so also, the nature and degree of it's attainment.
3. To know if they were interested in their role-reversal in terms of their remaining householders after the death of their husbands.
4. To explain their perception and the formation of their social-self and the strategy adopted by them for the same.
5. To ascertain the societal response to their present state of affairs and also to their social-self.

6. And, finally, to examine the relationship among their deprivation, renunciation and formation of social-self.

Methodology

Majority of the thousands of Bengali widows who had come to Varanasi city little prior to or soon after Independence, both for their sustenance and getting *moksha* or *mukti*, died earlier and the remaining ones are now elderly widows. A sizeable number of the Bengali widows in Varanasi city are also those who have become widows while living with their husbands and children in the city itself. But a precise number of the Bengali widows living in the city, at any given point in time, is not known authentically in absence of their exclusive census enumerated by the district census office or any other organization, though it has been estimated thousands in numbers.

Since the exact universe of the Bengali widows living in Varanasi city was not known, it was not possible to draw the sample of our respondents in the scientific manner. Hence, for the purpose of the present study, we selected 250 Bengali widows living in a few *ashramas*, *bhavans*, dingy rooms and even in the premises of a number of temples located in the different *mohallas* near Ganga *ghats*. Their selection was done through the snowball technique, i.e., asking a few widow respondents about other widows who could be contacted for the purpose of our study. Then, the data was collected with the help of an inventory of relevant questions formulated originally in Bangla (its English version is given in Appendix-B in the thesis). The respondents were contacted several times at Ganga *ghats*, in temples, *ashramas*, *bhavans*, their residences and even on the road-sides. They were interviewed extensively on the major issues related to the present study, besides on their family background, age at which they got married and became widows, medium or the source persons/organizations with him/her or through which they came to Varanasi city. It may, however, be mentioned here that the findings of our study, given below, may not be generalized in absence of the scientific sampling of our respondents. Although every aspects of their real life situation could be highlighted due to limitation of social analysis in a survey research, but the patterns of their socio-religious life as well as their deprivations, renunciation and formation of social-self may largely be seen among the majority of the Bengali widows living in Varanasi city. Anyway, to substantiate our arguments presented through the various chapters, we have also given separately (in Appendix-A) 25 case-studies drawn from our respondents, followed by the analysis of these cases along the main theme of the present study on deprivation, renunciation and formation of social-self among the Bengali widows living in Varanasi city.

Findings

The major findings of the present study have been discussed in chapters 3, 4, and 5 along the main theme of deprivation, renunciation and formation of social-self among the Bengali widows living in Varanasi city. But before stating about the findings of the present study, it is not out of context to mention here that we have briefly situated, in chapter 1, the studied theme in the tradition of renunciation, asceticism or *virakti* as

prescribed in the Hindu *Dharmashastras*, and, so also, practiced by the people in the past. We have done this with the purpose of knowing the position of the women in the Hindu *Shastric* tradition(s) in this matter. In this chapter, we have also discussed quite elaborately the tradition of renunciation, asceticism or *virakti* and also the importance of the householders in the Hindu religio-philosophical traditions. Besides, we have mentioned about a complementary relationship between the renouncers and the householders existed in the past which we have analysed, in somewhat detailed manner, in the concluding chapter 7. In addition, we have analysed, in this chapter, the negation of renunciation or asceticism for the women in the Hindu *Dharmashastras* which have prescribed for them the *Svadharmas*, i.e., serving their husbands faithfully and dutifully. Although we have found that the women from the certain sections of society were also allowed to become *Sanyasini* (renouncer) in the ancient period, but the same was refused to them in the later period. In spite of putting ban on the custom of committing sati and the adoption of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, the upper caste Hindu widows were customarily not allowed to remarry, or even a large majority of them preferred themselves apparently not to get remarried, due to the customary practice and to remain widows to remain widows for the rest of their life. This continued largely upto the recent past. Hence, notwithstanding the normative model prescribed for widows – going for *niyoga* (copulation with a man preferably the younger brother of the deceased husband) for having a male child, if they did not have any, to inherit the family property and taking the lineage forward, we have examined as to why the Hindu widows were not allowed to take up renunciation. Finally, we have delineated, in this chapter, the main objectives alongwith method of the present study, besides giving a brief outline of the issues discussed in the rest chapters.

We have described, in details, about the socio-religious profile of the city in Chapter 2. Besides mentioning about the origin and socio-religious importance of the city, the presence of a number of Hindu *sampradayas* or sects of Vaishnavism and Shaivism as well as other religious practices of the people living therein, we have discussed about the unique tradition of *Kashivas* accepted particularly the Bengali widows for their sustenance and ultimately getting *moksha* or *mukti*. But we have also analysed, in this chapter, how the upper castes Bengali widows were deprived of their rights of the inheritance of the property of their deceased husband or their share in the property of the joint family at the pretext of sending them or an account of their coming on for the *Kashivas*.

As mentioned above, we have analysed both the material and non-material or emotional deprivation of our respondents in chapter 3. We have measured their deprivations – both before and after their coming to and living in Varanasi city, alongwith a number of items which are required for a normal human being. Keeping in view the differential nature of deprivation, we have examined both the material and non-material or emotional deprivations of our respondents alongwith their socio-personal background with the view of finding the relationship(s), if any, between the two. More precisely, we have found a majority of the elderly respondents (60 years and above in age) both materially and emotionally deprived. We have also found that nearly two-third of them had got married at the age of less than 14 years. Hence, they were deprived of their childhood as well as teenage. Not only that but nearly one-fourth of our respondents had become

widow at a very tender age and, thus, were deprived from their marital life. Since a large majority (170) of our respondents hailed from the economically poor family, they were deprived materially at both their natal and affinal families. Educationally also, a little more than 50 per cent of our respondents were illiterate. As far as their deprivation on account of not having children is concerned, we have found only 43 issueless respondents. But in the case of a large majority of our respondents having grown up children, we have noted the lack of reciprocity. That means, their children hardly cared for their elderly widowed mothers living in Varanasi city. Furthermore, besides discussing briefly the impact of social reform movements organized in Bengal and also in Varanasi city – although in limited fashion in the case of the latter, we have found, in this chapter, a large majority of our respondents leaving behind one set of deprivations in Bengal and living with another set of deprivations in Varanasi city. Finally, we have analysed the material deprivation of our respondents on the basis of the types of their shelter or residential accommodation and the modes of their subsistence in Varanasi city. We have, however, not found, in this chapter, one-to-one relationship between their material and non-material or emotional deprivations. In other words, we have seen their both types of deprivation separately in some cases but overlapping in other cases.

The practice of both renunciation and asceticism through forming the numerous *mathas* (monasteries), *ashramas*, *akharas*, etc. in the city has been discussed in chapter 4. We have also analysed the community of both the ascetics and the renunciators which is different from the concept of community studied in sociology and social anthropology. With the earlier stated conceptual understanding and practice of asceticism and renunciation alongwith the associated community, we have found, in this chapter, a large majority of our respondents not being a renouncer or an ascetic in the sense in which the renunciators and ascetics live in Varanasi city or elsewhere in the country. But we have seen all of our respondents being Shaivites as they had strong faith in Lord Shiva and his counterpart goddesses such as Ma Annapurna, Durga and Kali – these goddesses being exclusively in the domain of the Bengalis. However, we have also noted certain forms of renunciation or asceticism practiced by our respondents, both as the compulsive or the forced and the voluntary one, such as their continued adoption of a number of socio-religious symbols and practices such as putting on white sari, taking Ganga bath regularly, worshipping gods and goddesses (in some cases, their *gurus* and even tormented portrait of their deceased husbands), taking one-time vegetarian meal in small quantity, observing fast, offering oblations to gods and goddesses, and ablutions to their deceased husbands, chanting *mantras*, *namas*, participating in *katha/kirtan*, religious songs and other such religious activities, etc. We have, thus, found a large majority of our elderly respondents living the life of a renouncer of some type or the other. So also, we have observed them their being ascetic in the sense of their living a community life in the various *ashramas*, *bhavans*, *dharmasalas*, temples' premises and even at the Ganga *ghats*. Although we have seen some aspects of a community life such as sharing each other's feelings, joy and sorrow, caring for each other in the case of illness, offering prayers and chanting *mantras* together, etc. in the case of a large majority of our respondents, but the other aspects of community such as role-reversal or playing the role of a householder, exercising control or authority over other members as completely missing.

We have also examined, in this chapter, the purpose of their taking up renunciation in whatsoever form(s) alongwith measuring the degree of the same. While doing this, we have kept both their voluntary and forced renunciation as a constant factor or reason. Anyway, we have found that a large majority of our respondents had taken up renunciation for attaining the peace of their mind, out of desperation, and dying peacefully in Varanasi city and attaining the *moksha*. A very small number (10) of our respondents had taken up renunciation to overcome their negative identity of widowhood in terms of it being considered as a curse, inauspicious on the auspicious occasions, etc. As far as the degree of their renunciation is considered, we have found that a large majority (60%) of our respondents had least renounced the worldly-affairs as they were more concerned with their daily sustenance or earning livelihood, shelter, remembering- though occasionally- their kith and kin including their deceased husbands, etc. However, the renunciation or asceticism, in the case of our respondents, is to be understood not in the conventional sense in which the renouncers as well as ascetics have been accepted in the Hinduism, or for that matter in any religion, both at the principle and practice levels. Instead, it is to be understood along with the above mentioned indicators and that too due to their destitute conditions, and, over and above, their condemned widowhood.

Notwithstanding the spiritual-self in the case of a renouncer or an ascetic, every individual strives for his or her selfhood as well as social-self. While achieving selfhood is easier as every individual is always conscious of it whose manifestation may or may not be always visible, but achieving and demonstrating social-self is comparatively more difficult in the case of a person who is poor, illiterate and elderly, and who lives even in destitute condition. Generally speaking, achieving selfhood as well as social-self for a woman in a traditional society like our is much more difficult due to the fact that women have always been discriminated, subordinated and even exploited in a patriarchal society. Not only that but this becomes almost impossible in the case of widows, barring a few widows hailing from the families of the relatively better socio-economic status. We have analysed, quite elaborately, in chapter 5, the Hinduideal image of the womanhood, motherhood and even widowhood in both the normative models of the Hindu *Dharmashastras* and in the folk traditions. We have also referred to, in this chapter, both the old and the new myths about the ideal womanhood, motherhood and widowhood derived from the Hindu *Dharmashastras* and percolated down to the folk traditions. The purposes of the new myths are, however, different wherein an ideal Hindu woman has been projected as a mother- *Bharat Mata*- Mother India. Similarly, the widowhood has been eulogized by considering it as *Satimata*, both metaphorically and practically (a widow either committing *sati* - self immolation or being lean and thin, and living with devotion to God and with the memory of her deceased husband). Also, we have analysed this in view of the shifting paradigms of the womanhood in Indian society in general and in the Bengali society in particular since the ancient time.

Thus, while analyzing our data in this perspective, we have found almost all of our respondents in full agreement with the Hindu ideal image of a womanhood and motherhood. We have accepted their such response as a natural outcome of somewhat traditional pattern of their socialization in the Hindu patriarchal family or society, although we have not probed this aspect further simply because of our focus, in this

chapter, being on the formation of selfhood as well as of social–self among our respondents. However, all of our respondents had accepted widowhood as a curse leading to both material and emotional deprivations, and also to social uprootedness, besides being blamed for 'eating' the husband or causing to his death and also being considered inauspicious one on the auspicious occasions. Their such response may easily be understood in relation to their wretched economic condition and social neglect in their both affinal and natal families and even in a religious city like Varanasi. Had they been living in a better socio–economic condition and getting cared properly, their response(s) would have perhaps differed on this issue. The indications of this were also visible apparently in the case of a small number of our respondents who were staying in a few *ashramas* or in a few similar socio–religious organizations.

We have also examined in greater details, in this chapter, the nature and forms of selfhood as well as of social–self among our respondents, living in Varanasi city, with the view of the possible impact on them of the century–long social reforms carried out more systematically and vigorously in the undivided Bengal. Although such social reforms had very distantly had affected the upper castes Hindus of Varanasi city and of the adjoining areas, but a few tenets of the social reform movements and more of the movement for national freedom were distinctively visible in the city. A sizeable number of the women, including the upper castes Hindu widows, had also actively participated in both the types of movements. Through their participation, they had also become conscious and aware of themselves and of the various types of social evils of which they themselves were the victims. Yet, both the national freedom movement and social reform movements enabled the upper castes Hindu women, including widows, to form some sort of selfhood and social–self among them. But after the political Independence of the country, the earlier zeal of carrying out social reform movements got collapsed in which the fast–growing materialistic orientation of the people also played a very significant role.

As the conceptual understanding of the women's formation of selfhood or social–self or even social identity is a relatively new one, so are its indicators such as formal education, paid employment, participation in the various types of socio–political activities, individual freedom, etc. The analysis of selfhood or social–self or social identity in the case of our respondents, especially the elderly, illiterate and the poor ones, could have not been possible along with the above–mentioned indicators. Hence, we have analysed their selfhood or social–self or even social identity with the help of altogether different set of indicators or activities associated with their socio–political background and day–to–day life in the religious city of Varanasi. These are: their not being dependent on their kith and kins including their children, taking up even begging but only for their bare sustenance, getting engaged in the religious pursuits of some sorts for their peace of mind and welfare of others including the members of their affinal and natal families, etc. Thus, we have found all of our respondents retaining their selfhood or even forming social–self of some sort (different from the social–self of a married or even unmarried woman) through their getting engaged in the above–mentioned activities. Even in the case of begging, their selfhood or social–self got demonstrated in the forms of being satisfied with the alms in whatever form and quantity it was received, and giving the blessing to or wishing for the welfare of the alms–giver. Their selfhood or social–self was also seen in their getting engaged in the

various types of social services for themselves, especially in the case of falling sick of some respondents, rendering both paid and unpaid services in a number of temples, *ashramas*, *bhavans*, etc.

It is imperative that for both renunciation or asceticism and the formation of selfhood or social-self or social identity, some sort of social security is needed. This is more necessary in the case of a person who is meansless even for his or her bare sustenance and shelter. Social security for a person, living either in rural or urban areas, is available in the form of social insurance and social assistance. While former is available for a person who can afford to pay the required premium, the latter is given to a person who is meansless. However, even for the latter ones, certain means-tests are: the person has to produce a certification with the effect of not getting any assistance from any other sources including one's kith and kins, to be of the age of 60 years and above, and even not suffering from any chronic disease.

Since our respondents happened to be not only widows but also living in the wretched socio-economic conditions in Varanasi city, we have analysed the nature and forms(s) of social security available to them in Chapter 6. As our respondents were not qualified for the first type of social security, we have relied on the second type of social security available exclusively in the form of pension under the Old-Age Pension Scheme of the State Govt. We have, thus, found that only a small number of our respondents had got benefited from the State Government's Old-age Pension Scheme as well as Old-age Home Scheme and that too after crossing through a number of bureaucratic and non-bureaucratic hurdles such as paying bribes to the government officials, medical practitioners and even the dalals (middlemen). Even the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama had provided pension to a small number of our respondents, in addition to providing them free medical treatment. But in either of the cases, the amount of pension was too meager to arrange even one-time meal for our respondents. Hence, we have also found, in this chapter, a large majority (73.6%) of our respondents living in the city without any support, either from the State Govt. or voluntary social organizations. This means, they had been sustaining either through begging or working as domestic servants even in their old-age or both.

Keeping in view the religious nature of the city, we have also tried, in this chapter, to analyse their social security in terms of the societal response, i.e., the role of a number of social organizations and socio-religious institutions for providing social security to widows in general and our respondents in particular. More specifically, we have found a sizeable number of our respondents being dependent on a few socio-religious organizations/institutions like *ashramas*, *mathas*, *bhavans*, etc. for their daily sustenance as well as their shelter. Their daily sustenance was available from these temples, *ashramas*, *bhavans*, etc. in the forms of daily getting the prasadas, occasionally full meals, coins, clothes, etc. Although a little less than one-third of our respondents sustained their livelihood with their family earning, yet even their such sustenance was not a smooth one as they were bounded by a number of restrictions imposed on them by their own children, grand-children and daughter-in-laws.

Finally, we have analysed social security available to our respondents from the

householders and the pilgrims. The householders drawn from the different walks of life are also religious-minded in Varansai city. They take the Ganga bath and visit the various temples, ashramas, etc. almost regularly for offering prayers to the gods and goddesses. While doing this, they too give alms to the beggars in the forms of coins, raw-food though small in quantity and also sometimes pucca food. Even a large number of pilgrims visit the city, on some auspicious occasions, for taking Ganga bath, visiting temples, offering oblations to the gods and goddesses and ablutions to their ancestors. Along with these, they also give alms in the forms of coins, food, clothes, etc to the poor especially the beggars. While they do this out of their religiosity as well as compassion for the poor, we have found that their such acts had also served as a social security for a large majority of our respondents.

Conclusions

While summing up the discussion made in chapters 1-6, we have mentioned, in chapter 7, that the deprivation, renunciation and social-self of the people in general and of our respondents in particular may not be understood in isolation. Instead, there could be a linear relationship among them. This means that the depravation, in any form, of a person may lead to his or her taking up renunciation or asceticism. But even the renunciation or asceticism is to be understood more appropriately in the form of one's attaining spiritual-self rather than social-self, unless such renouncer or ascetic stands exclusively for the welfare of the people or the society. In absence of that, there may not a be a symmetrical relationship among the deprivation, renunciation and social-self. In other words, a deprived person may not necessarily take up renunciation or asceticism. Likewise, a renouncer or an ascetic may also not be involved in forming his or her social self. Instead, he or she may be self-centred.

But in the case of our respondents, we have found some sorts of one to one relationship among their deprivation, renunciation and social-self although in varying forms and degrees. We have found all of our respondents being deprived in one form or the other and renouncing the worldly-affairs. But we have also seen them not being renouncer in strict sense of the term as prescribed in the Hindu Dharmashastras. For instance, we have found some of our respondents having one type of desire or the other manifested in the forms of remembering their kith and kins including their deceased husbands, getting occasionally better meals, etc. Also, a very of our respondents were concerned with forming their social-self, though a sizeable number of them were striving, in some forms, for forming their selfhood and social-self as well.

Finally, while discussing social security measures in chapter 6, we have suggested four alternative measures to be adopted in the case of widows living in Varanasi city. Tese are: one, there is need of forming the organizations of the widows themselves for caring themselves. Secondly, a number of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) need to be formed exclusively for the welfare of the widows. Both the widows' organizations and the NGOs together may amount pressure on the State machinery for taking the cause of social security of the widows in a more active and vigorous ways. Thirdly, there is also a need for the well-off householders to set up more number of old-age homes, with better facilities and proper care, to accommodate the widows. Finally the widows

themselves need to be enabled not only to remain the passive recipients of the benefits of social security measures but also to act as an active role-performer through forming their social-self and also caring for themselves as well as for the society in a more positive manner.