

Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

Punjab, the food basket of India, the land of the green and the white revolutions, the *el dorado* of people from poorer states, who come, seeking their fortune, has also become infamous for its highly patriarchal character. This is particularly evident from the highly adverse sex ratio as well as child sex ratio. At the same time, popular culture legitimizes the devalued and discriminated status of women, leading to their being treated as second class citizens of this otherwise developed state. This is all the more true for widows, who continue to lead a dehumanized existence, cast out of the society, excluded from 'all that is good and happy in life', leading a life of penury and hardships, all to atone for 'some ostensible sins which they have committed in a past life'.

It is evident from the review of literature, that widows across India continue to suffer from a multitude of problems, which include violence, lack of decision-making power, lack of skills, income, employment and so on. The most conspicuous cause underlying these problems is culture and tradition, which makes the widows outcasts from society. However, there has been no study on widows in Punjab and particularly a cross-sectional study attempting to analyse the problems of widows across various categories is missing. Hence the significance of the present study.

Historically, it has been seen that the status of widows has also not remained static over the centuries. Paradoxically, the status was better in the Vedic ages and declined thereafter. Sati was not in existence in the Vedic age and widow remarriage was permissible, as was *niyoga*. This, obviously, meant that almost all the restrictions which governed the life of a widow came into existence in later ages. The *Smriti* period reveals a deterioration in the status of widows; sati came into existence, widow remarriage was prohibited and restrictions started being imposed on dress, food, and everyday lives of the widows. They had to get their heads tonsured and lead a life of piety, austerity and chastity. The idea was to control their sexuality and desires. The medieval period witnessed a further decline in the status of widows, with emergence of the custom of *jauhar*, denial of remarriage rights of widows and continuation of the

denials and deprivations regarding food, dress, ornaments etc. Such a situation continued well into the British period, when the activities of the social reformers led to the enactment of legislation prohibiting sati and permitting widow remarriage. However, the socio-cultural status of widows continued to be the same. Cities such as Vrindavan, Mathura and Kashi became havens of refuge, providing shelter to the widows where they spent their time in singing bhajans and begging.

Notably, widows were not given any inheritance rights throughout Indian history. In Punjab, the custom of *Karewa* or *chadar andazi*, or levirate marriage prevailed and led, many a times, to the forced remarriage of widows. Post-independence, laws were enacted which benefitted women in general. Thus widows, too, got the right to inheritance and the legal situation of widows improved. De facto, widows continued to be shackled by the burdens of socio-cultural traditions. This is particularly true of Hindu and Sikh widows. Islam and Christianity however, do not impose many religio-cultural restrictions on the lives of widows.

In such a scenario, the present study sought to assess the status of widows in the state of Punjab. The study is a cross-sectional study, seeking to analyse the status of widows across the categories of religion, age, class, caste, employment and education. Thus, it sought to assess, whether widows across different religions, age groups, castes, classes, employment and education faced different problems.

The sample of 400 respondents was selected from the different religious categories of Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians. Thus, 100 respondents from each religious category were chosen. Primarily, the sample was chosen from two districts, Rupnagar and Amritsar, which were selected in view of their ranking on the HDI index. However, the researcher had to broaden the canvas to include nearby districts of Gurdaspur, Malerkotla and SAS Nagar, as sufficient number of Christian and Muslim respondents were not available in the two selected districts. The data was collected personally by the researcher using an interview schedule. As many of the respondents were illiterate or only semi-literate, the interview schedule was translated into Punjabi and administered by the researcher. The verbal responses of the respondents were noted down and later translated into English for the purpose of the report.

An attempt was made to have equitable distribution of different castes, However, as there are no recognized Scheduled Castes among Muslims and Christians, the representation of Scheduled Castes in the overall sample was not representative of the caste composition of Punjab. Thus, a majority of the respondents were from General Castes, with a little more than one-fourth from Backward Classes and approximately one-seventh of the sample was drawn from among Scheduled Castes.

The respondents for the present study were between 24 years and 81 years of age and were categorized into various age groups. The youngest respondent had been widowed just a few months previously after merely two years of marriage. A majority of the respondents were below the age of 40 years at the time of their husband's death. It was found that, prior to their death, the husbands of a majority of the respondents were employed in the informal sector, where wages are low, job certainty is less and there are no other benefits. Thus, the respondents belonged to the weaker socio-economic section of society.

A majority of the respondents had three or more than three children. The number of males among the children of the respondents was considerably higher revealing that son preference was high even in this section of society. Almost half of the children were in the productive age group while the rest were below twenty years of age and hence dependent. A large proportion of this younger age group were not studying revealing that the respondents in the present study were themselves unaware of the significance of education and so were not able to inculcate the same in their children. It is pertinent to mention here that many of the respondents referred to the existing drug problem in Punjab, when they revealed that their children are addicts and hence not able to work or study. A very small proportion of the children of the respondents were employed; a majority were not working and the rest were younger and so could not work. Slightly more than half of the children were already married.

Relative deprivation of education is one of the grave concerns of widows as revealed by the present study. The study revealed that the educational status of the respondents was quite low with a majority either illiterate or barely literate, that is, they had merely completed five years of schooling. This, obviously impacts their

employability. A very small proportion of the respondents had attained higher education.

Religion-wise, it was found that the educational status of the Christian widows was the worst, closely followed by the Muslim widows. The Sikh widows had the best educational status. Caste-wise, the Scheduled Castes were the worst off in this regard, while the General Category had the best educational status. The reasons for this could be traced to the general apathetic attitude towards the education of girls, which impacted the respondents in the present study as well. Paradoxically, respondents in the youngest age group were relatively backward in terms of educational attainments, while the respondents in the 31-50 years of age were relatively better placed in this context.

Significantly, a majority of the respondents had access to basic civic amenities such as toilets, drinking water, separate kitchen, etc. justifying Punjab's claims of being developed at least in this context. Yet, it must be mentioned that more than one-fifth of the respondents did not have access to bathroom or toilet and one-tenth did not have access to drinking water. A religion-wise analysis again reveals the lower status of Christians in this regard, closely followed by Muslim widows.

Almost all the respondents had the basic identity documents, such as Voter card, ration card and aadhar card, but a majority did not have access to documents essential for persons of lower-socio-economic status such as Blue card and yellow card, which would enable them to get the benefit of various welfare schemes.

The study further revealed that it is primarily the Sikh and Hindu widows from the General Category who are following certain socio-cultural practices linked with widowhood. However, widows in Punjab, in this context were relatively better situated than those in other states, for there are only a few restrictions on dress, ornaments etc. They are not completely ostracized, except for being excluded from a few functions relating to marriage and birth rites. Tonsure is not practiced here and there are very few restrictions on food. Age-wise, the respondents from the middle age groups of 31-40 years and 41-50 years were the ones who had to face the greatest restrictions. Paradoxically, being forced to follow socio-cultural practices relating to widowhood is not restricted to the illiterate respondents, but extends to even the

educated ones. In fact, many of the respondents were pressurized for levirate marriage also, which as stated earlier, is the most common cultural tradition in Punjab in relation to widowhood. Here, again, it was primarily the Sikh widows who were pressurized for this. It must be mentioned that they were able to withstand the pressure. Only one respondent reported that she was married off, but her second husband also passed away. Caste-wise, it was found that widows from all caste groups reported such pressure, but the majority was from among the General Category. Ironically, even the employed widows, or should one say that particularly the employed widows were being pressurized for levirate marriage. The linkage of this tradition with property is indisputable and that's why probably, the employed widows were being pressurized for levirate marriage.

Apart from these traditions, widows in Punjab continue to be regarded as a bad omen at auspicious occasions and so are left out of the rites and rituals, even if these are of their own children. The youngest ones are simply left at home, while the elder ones are merely present but may not participate. Again, it is primarily the General Category widows who are excluded from auspicious occasions. Paradoxically, the Christians were the largest group asserting that they were not allowed to participate in auspicious occasions. This could be primarily because majority of the Christians are converts and continue to be impacted by age-old traditions. Moreover, as stated earlier, the Muslims and Christians in the region are effected and influenced by the Hindu and Sikh traditions and continue to follow them. Again, employment and education have very little relation with this as it was found that even employed and educated respondents were excluded from participation in auspicious ceremonies.

It is significant to note that majority of the respondents were employed. However, there was a vast difference in the employment status of respondents from different religious categories, with Muslim widows at the lower end of the scale and the Christians at the upper end. The reason for this higher employment rate among Christians becomes clear when one looks at the type of work and income of the respondents, for they were mostly employed in low paying seasonal work or in the domestic sector.

A majority of the employed widows were concentrated in the informal sector, employed as daily wagers, contractual labour or as domestic help. Only a few had jobs in the organized sector which offers better pay, job security and has lower levels of exploitation. This was particularly true for the Christian and Muslim respondents, of whom more than ninety per cent were employed in the informal sector. The situation was only slightly better for the Hindu and Sikh respondents.

Caste-wise analysis reveals some very significant findings. First, while nine-tenths of the Scheduled Caste widows were employed, barely two-thirds of the Backward Class and less than half of the General Category were employed. Second, a majority of the Scheduled Caste widows were employed as domestic helps, while there was a wider distribution of employment categories among the General Category and Backward Class respondents with a significant proportion also employed in the Government sector or as teachers.

The impact of education in getting better employment is clearly visible in the present study. Yet the impact was limited by socio-cultural restraints and consequent lack of decision-making ability. The study revealed that all the respondents who had attained higher education were employed while the employment rates decreased with decreasing levels of education. Furthermore, the lower educated respondents were primarily employed in the informal sector, while those with higher education were employed in Government service or as teachers.

An age-wise analysis of employment also revealed some interesting findings. Most of the employed respondents were in the age groups of 31-40 years and 41-50 years. These respondents also constituted the majority of those employed in the organized sector. Significantly, not only were the younger age group among the least employed, they were also employed mostly in the unorganized sector. This was in consonance with their lower levels of educational attainments.

Obviously, the occupational distribution has contributed to the generally lower economic status of the widows, particularly Christians, Muslims and Scheduled Castes. They are mostly in the unskilled labour category or self employed in small businesses and definitely not in any top-end employment.

Trends in economic and social well-being show that despite the social, cultural and economic growth, women and especially widows are lagging behind. The lower economic standing of the widows is clearly visible from their income. The study revealed that more than half of the respondents had an income of less than Rs 1500 per month. Only a few had a source of income other than their employment, while a little more than half also got widow or old age pension. Again, it is the Christian and Muslim respondents who had the lowest levels of income with Hindu respondents slightly better off and the Sikh respondents having the highest levels of income. Caste-wise, it was the Backward Class and the Scheduled Castes, who had the lowest levels of income, while the General Category respondents were slightly better off. An employment-wise analysis revealed that only two of the unemployed respondents had an income above Rs 30,000 while a higher proportion of the employed respondents had incomes of this level. Almost half of the employed respondents and a little more than half of the unemployed ones had income levels of below Rs 1500 per month. There was a clear preponderance of the youngest age-group in the lower income levels, while again, it was the respondents in the age groups of 31-50 years who had higher levels of income. That education plays a major role in improving income levels is clearly visible with a majority of the illiterate respondents having income levels of less than Rs 1500 per month.

Poverty of the widows becomes obvious from an analysis of their asset structure: house ownership, land ownership and ownership of consumer durables. A similar situation was visible in respect of property- both movable and immovable. A very small proportion of the respondents owned land, about one-third owned their own house. An insignificant proportion owned a shop or livestock. Religion-wise, again the Christians and Muslim widows were the worst off, while Hindu and Sikh were better situated. Most of those who owned land were Sikhs. The respondents in the age category of 31-50 years were primarily the ones who owned any kind of property. Only a negligible proportion from other age groups owned property. Similarly, a higher proportion of respondents from the General Category owned property as against Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes. Although a higher proportion of employed respondents owned property, yet a considerable number of

unemployed respondents too owned property. Thus, employment did not have a very significant impact on property ownership. In fact, some of the respondents were not working because they had considerable assets to their name, so employment was not necessary.

Furthermore, most of the respondents did not have access to other assets such as cycle, vehicle, phone, LPG connection and so on. This was particularly true of Christian and Muslim respondents, and castewise, it was the Scheduled Castes who had least access to these. A direct correlation between ownership of assets and employment and education could be traced in the study, as it was found that most of the employed and educated respondents owned some assets, particularly cycle or/and phone. Age-wise, the respondents in the 31-50 years age groups were better off in this respect.

Very few of the respondents had purchased their property by themselves; most of them had inherited it from their husbands'. Notwithstanding all the laws guaranteeing inheritance rights to daughter, only two of the respondents had got their property from their parents. The reasons could be seen in the lack of awareness among the respondents about the laws relating to property ad inheritance. Awareness about these laws was highest among the Sikhs, the General Category, employed and higher educated respondents. Although respondents of all age groups revealed themselves to be aware of the laws, the highest proportion of aware respondents was found to be in the age group of 31-50 years. Likewise, the study revealed a similar lack of awareness about the laws relating to maintenance by children in old age. Awareness was highest among General Category, employed and educated respondents.

Most of the respondents either lived in a house owned by themselves or in one owned by their in-laws. A small proportion lived in a house owned by their sons, while the rest lived either in a rented house, or in their parents' house. Almost half of the respondents lived in a pucca house, but one-third lived in a semi-pucca house and a considerable number lived in a kuccha house. The largest proportion of respondents were living with their children.

This deprivation of assets, and obvious poverty among the respondents leads to the next issue of lack of health care. Lack of time, lack of funds and socialization are all contributory factors in not accessing appropriate health care services.

Such social exclusion and deprivation also leads to violence against widows. They continue to be subjected to numerous forms of violence at the hands of their own family members, be they marital or natal family members. In fact, almost one-third of the respondents said they were subjected to violence by their sons. The reasons were primarily economic, relating to control of income and property.

A few of the widows were also forced out of their marital house. In this context, it was the Sikh widows, General Category and those with no or low levels of educational attainments, who were forced out of the marital house. Significantly, it was the younger age widows who were forced out of the marital household.

One can counter violence only if one is aware of legal remedies for the same. In the present study, it was found that very few of the respondents were aware of the legal provisions, such as Domestic Violence Act, Free Legal Aid, Women's Cell or not being summoned alone to the police station. This awareness was lowest among the Christians, Scheduled Castes, unemployed and younger respondents.

'The ability to make informed decisions' is empowerment in very simple words. It is participation in decision-making regarding themselves, their lives and the lives of their children which would lead to overall empowerment of women in general and widows in particular. The present study revealed that a majority of the respondents were able to participate in decision-making regarding various aspects of their lives. However, it is significant to note that neither education nor employment seemed to play any significant role in decision-making ability, for it was found that more of the illiterate respondents were able to make their own decisions as compared to the educated ones. No clear conclusion can be drawn on the basis of religion, for there was a variation in decision-making ability on different aspects among the various religious groups. Age, however, was a significant factor, for decision-making ability was lowest in the youngest age group and increased with the age category.

Significantly, the respondents in the present study revealed a higher level of political awareness, particularly about voting rights. Almost all of them had cast their

vote in the previous elections, but very few had voted according to their own choice, for the voting behavior was determined by relatives or friends. However, less than half of them were aware about the reservation of seats for women in grassroots governance.

They had very valid concerns for their future which included their own health, care in old age, education and marriage of children, income, etc.

Keeping in mind the low socio-economic status of widows, the Government of India as well as the Government of the State of Punjab have enunciated various schemes for their welfare. However, these schemes are lacking in a few areas which practically make them null and void in empowering the beneficiaries. First, they are not given sufficient publicity, so awareness levels are low. Second, the money given to the beneficiaries is a mere Rs 200-250/-, which in these days is not enough to cover one day's expenses, what to talk about a month's expenditure. Third, even this meagre sum is not distributed efficiently and there are leakages on the way with the respondents claiming that many times they do not get their pension. Fourth, politics plays a role in allotment of pension and sometimes the deserving beneficiaries are left out while those not eligible get the widow/old age pension. The present study revealed both the low levels of awareness of the schemes as well as the low percentage of the beneficiaries.

On the whole, widows in the state of Punjab continue to suffer from 'multiple marginalities', be it in the field of education, employment, income, property ownership or awareness. They are subjected to various forms of violence at the hands of the so-called protectors. Among the various religious groups, Christians and Muslims were educationally backward and the least economically empowered, while Hindus and particularly Sikhs were subjected to various forms of cultural subordination. Castewise, the Scheduled Castes were the worst off in all aspects, be it education, employment, income, ownership of assets or others. Regarding employment, one noted a mixed picture, primarily because the employment was mainly in the unorganized sector. The study revealed a positive correlation of education, particularly higher education with all aspects of social and economic empowerment of widows. The status of widows in Punjab exposes the reality

between precept and practice, between laws and reality. The loss of a husband has wider ramifications than merely the loss of a partner, for it effects the woman's entire life, in fact her very identity as a person, for she becomes a non-entity upon the loss of a husband. Thus, widows continue to be a particularly vulnerable group requiring specific intervention by the State as well as Civil society for improving their status.

In this context, a few suggestions and recommendations may be put forth in order to improve the status of widows in India in general and Punjab in particular.

First, there is a need for enunciation of more policies and programmes for widows at all levels-national, state and district. However, these will have the desired impact only if there is sufficient awareness about them among the proposed beneficiaries. Various officials at all levels should be made accountable for creating awareness about these schemes. Another necessary factor in this context is simplifying the procedure for availing the benefits of these schemes. As a majority of the proposed beneficiaries are either illiterate or semi-literate, it is essential that the procedure is simplified and the benefits are easily available.

Time to time auditing of the scheme at all levels should be done. Utmost transparency and accountability must be ensured in selecting the beneficiaries so that the poor and deserving applicants are included and non-eligible applicants are excluded. The Schemes should not only be limited to BPL families but also extend to non BPL families. Corruption at the official level needs to be dealt with strictly. Above all, monetary assistance whether in form of pension or wages should not be delayed and should be disbursed at regular intervals. Amount of pension benefits should be enhanced to really provide financial aid to widows to cope with the present state of inflation. The schemes should not be limited to monetary benefits, but should aim at overall empowerment of widows. Thus skill development, vocational education and employment should be made a part of the schemes. Instead of a welfare oriented approach, the policies should focus on an inclusive approach which aims to empower the widows rather than giving them doles. It would be apt to quote the old saying, (with a change of gender) "Give a woman a fish and you will feed her for a day, teach a woman to fish and you will feed her for life".

Initiatives need to be taken to promote higher education of girls as well as widows. There should be special provision for the less educated widows who could enhance their educational skills after their husband's death so that they could take up good jobs. This is very important for a woman who becomes a widow at a very young age and she has to bear the entire responsibility of her family. At the same time special provisions may be made for the education of their children. Special Skill development and Vocational training programmes should be organized for widows.

There is a need to enhance access to bank credit and government programmes. Widows should be made aware of the banking facilities and special minimum saving scheme should be launched exclusively for widows so that atleast they could use that money when required. There should be a provision that the bank account should be exclusively in the name of the widow and should be operated by her only.

The state should provide for special destitute homes and/or hostels for widows so that widows can stay there in case they have no other safe haven. This is particularly essential for elderly widows because they may be considered a burden by their family.

The need of the hour is to create awareness about legal rights among widows. They should not only be made aware but empowered enough to assert their rights so that violence against them also decreases. Laws should be stringent specially regarding property rights. The Government should pass a strict law/Act that even if the property was not in the husband's name, the widow should be entitled to the joint family property. Special provisions to ameliorate violence against widows, which they face daily in their lives, should be made. The laws/Acts against violence should be implemented properly and awareness regarding the same should be made.

The state should rigorously implement poverty alleviation programmes targeting widows. Special loans for female headed households should be provided. Disaggregated data pertaining to widows/destitute widows should be collected, analysed or reflected in all India MIS (Management Information System) format of schemes. Special provisions should be made for the holistic empowerment of widows- be it economic, social or political.

None of these provisions will have any effect until there is a change in mindset. The cultural tenets need to be changed. Societal mindset needs to be altered. A widow, as a human being, has human rights and these should not be denied in the name of culture and tradition. Gender Sensitization Programmes should be made a part and parcel of every scheme of the Government, particularly schemes aimed at welfare of widows. These gender sensitization programmes should be aimed at the entire family of the widow in order to inculcate sensitivity towards the issues of widows. Furthermore, there is a need to have gender sensitization programmes for all the functionaries from Sarpanch to District level officials so that widows' problems are alleviated and they do not have to go from door to door or official to official in order to get their rightful due. It must be asserted that inhumane treatment of human beings will not be tolerated.

It would be apt to conclude the study with a quote from Bernadette Mosala, a South African feminist, "When men are oppressed, it is a tragedy, when women are oppressed, it is a tradition".