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Examining Empowerment among Indian Widows: A Qualitative study of the Narratives of Hindu Widows in North Indian Ashrams¹

By Nimi Mastey¹

Abstract

Contemporary discourse on widowhood in India tends to concentrate heavily on quantitative evaluation. Discussion of the narratives of the women is confined to more popular medium, and tends to focus on the need of the women to be empowered. By simply visiting ashrams in Vrindavan it becomes clear that the term "empowerment" is vastly up to interpretation. This study focuses on the models of empowerment applied by two different widow ashrams: Ma-dham and Chetan Bihar. Through obtaining narratives of the women's lives, I attempt to assess the success of the ashrams in "empowering" the widows, and question the necessity and implications of this empowerment. There seems to be no unified vision of what constitutes empowerment for any two women to the extent that while most dislike the state of widowhood, a significant and surprising number seem to prefer widowhood to marriage. In all, "empowerment of women", a phrase used by nearly every women's organization, is ambiguous and at times misused. In analyzing the situation of widows in Northern India, there emerges the need to distinguish between personal power and external empowerment by researchers in the field, as well as by the ashrams working to alleviate social injustice.

Keywords: widowhood, India, empowerment, quantitative comparative interviews

Widowhood in India is often described as a definitive and tragic moment in a women's life—one in which her identity is stripped away with the death of her husband. As early as the second century BCE, the Laws of Manu, an influential text in Hindu scripture, had created a set of structured gender relations in the Brahmin caste. Included in the text are the statutes that a widow must remove all excess adornments, observe fasts, eat limited meals each day, forgo hot foods, replace the red sindoor² on her forehead with ash from her husband's funeral pyre, and observe tonsure³. The same text also pronounces that a woman who is widowed cannot remarry. The ideal Hindu widow remains with her in-laws—a result of the patrilocal⁴ system of marriage in most of India—embodying this state of holy asceticism. This system of marriage places women in a situation of vulnerability after their husband's death, particularly if they do not earn income: they can neither reintegrate with their parental family, nor do they necessarily receive adequate support to live contentedly in their husband's village.

Within the normative structure of Brahmin⁵ gender roles is the assumption that the ban on remarriage of widows is reserved as a privilege for the higher castes⁶. Less acceptable forms of marriage, derived from the eight forms listed in the Hindu shastras were ascribed to the lower castes, namely a system of remarriage known as *pat* which is prevalent among the agriculturalists⁷. Because women in these societies are seen as producers—and reproducers of producers—their continued sexual activity after widowhood is viewed in parallel to the success of their economy⁸.

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For these reasons, a historical divide has been created between terms of widowhood for the higher and lower castes. While this ancient delineation of widowhood is still considered an idealized space for a widow to inhabit, the extent to which any given woman adheres to these structures today is largely dependent upon a variety of factors, including socio-economic status.⁹ Because of these financial considerations, many widows from lower-income families are not able to remain in the house of their in-laws without working or, in some circumstances, getting remarried. Oftentimes, if these women cannot, or do not wish to, work or remarry, they will leave their family structure for a variety of reasons. Some of these include, but are not limited to, a desire to relieve the burden on their family, a lack of connection to their in-laws or children, or a wish for independence from a life of familial ties. Hindu widows commonly relocate to religious pilgrimage sites, including Vrindavan and Varanasi—the birthplaces of Lord Krishna and Lord Shiva, respectively.

Needless to say, lifestyles and identities adopted by widows are highly individualized, and essentially no two women's stories are exactly the same. Perhaps the most difficult factors to assess among these actions are those of personal choice and empowerment. If a widow leaves her house after her husband's death, rather than remain with either her children or her in-laws, is that a matter of choice? Is the widow who leaves her family more or less empowered than the woman who stays? How subjective is empowerment, and can we ever define it objectively? Can we, as researchers, ethically define empowerment for another group of people, or is there an aspect of condescension in doing so?

This paper will elaborate on the methodology of this study, the meanings and assumptions in the term *empowerment*, media misconstructions of the term, and an exploration of how ashrams use and define empowerment. The basis of this paper is primary data collected through interviews in Chattikara and Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh, India. I will attempt to reshape the rhetoric around the phrase “empowerment of women” through the interviews I have conducted with widows, as well as through contextual analysis of previous research and popular portrayals of the subject. In all, I argue that using the mentality of empowerment when attempting to facilitate the success of women, in this case widowed women, can debatably be a disempowering act. There is a need to look through a lens of subjectivity as defined by the women, themselves, as well as to distinguish between personal and external notions of empowerment.

Methodology and Background

In this project, my choice to privilege the narrative over quantitative data is due to the dearth of contemporary individual perspectives on widowhood; the most recent personal accounts of widowhood date to the post-colonial era in Indian history, which presented a much different set of concerns. Most of the post-colonial texts focus on issues of *sati*¹⁰, the conflict between the views of the colonizers and colonized, and the space that widows occupied in the vacuum left after the end of the British rule. Contemporary accounts, as evidenced in my research, focus more heavily on the effect of sensationalization of the empowerment of widows in popular media and the effects of ashrams to quality of life.

The primary method of gathering data in this study was through individual interviews conducted with widows in two ashrams: *Ma-Dham* in Chattikara and *Chetan*

Bihar in Vrindavan. Eighteen widows in *Ma-Dham*, and eleven in *Chetan Bihar* were interviewed. I lived in *Ma-dham* for four weeks, observing interactions among the women and with the institution and administration. After expanding and organizing field notes and transcribing interviews, the data from the interviews was analyzed based on patterns in the narratives. The interviews were coded based on the following categories: 1) reasons for leaving home, 2) marital status 3) desire to stay in ashram, and 4) notions of empowerment. Before I begin the analysis of the narratives, I will give some context to the two ashrams.

Ma-Dham is an ashram approximately two kilometers outside the city of Vrindavan (in Chattikara) and is run by the non-governmental organization, The Guild of Service. It houses over ninety widows, and is staffed full-time by two wardens, both of whom are younger women. Most of the widows in this ashram are over the age of sixty, and a large proportion of women are from the northeastern state of Bengal. The ashram is located in the middle of a large field, about half a kilometer away from the main road. To get to the city for stores, temples, etc., one must take an auto-rickshaw for ten rupees round trip. The women in this ashram receive food, shelter, and minimal clothing for free, and many are eligible for the government pension of three hundred rupees per month. In regards to personal mobility, the women need permission to leave the ashram, as well as to withdraw money from their accounts.

Chetan Bihar is a government-run ashram for widows located centrally in the city. The ashram houses over two hundred widows and the average age of the women is significantly younger than in *Ma-Dham*. Many of the women walk daily to the bhajanashrams¹¹ to sing twice a day and earn small amounts of money and food rations. In addition to the three hundred rupee pensions, they also receive five hundred fifty rupees per month for personal expenses. The women have personal kitchens to cook their own food. They share rooms with one to three other widows. The ashram is set up like an apartment complex with no restrictions on leaving and coming back.

The Ambiguous and Indefinite Nature of the Term Empowerment

Defining what is meant by *empowerment* is arguably the most critical aspect of assessing what it means to *be* empowered, or *to* empower. Countless approaches to women's empowerment have been proposed, each assuming varied and often irresolvable stances to the issue. The Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies suggests that three different methods of empowerment have been attempted in South Asia: integrated development, economic empowerment, and consciousness-raising. These three trials each had their own theories about the source of women's lack of power, namely "greater poverty and lower access to resources, economic vulnerability, and subordination within patriarchal societies and socioeconomic inequalities."¹² Similarly, Professor Margot Breton at the University of Toronto argues that empowerment consists of five components: "social action, political awareness, the right to say and to 'have a say,' recognizing oneself and being recognized as competent, and the use of power."¹³

These definitions imply that empowerment means one was powerless to begin with. Additionally, because the definitions are created by institutions and not the people themselves, they imply a sense of hierarchy in which models of empowerment are enforced by an authority other than the individual. Because of these two reasons, institutional notions of empowerment function in a manner that is ironically

disempowering. This raises the question of what exactly it means to be disempowered, and who decides an individual's state of power. Current research has not focused on the construction of the term empowerment itself and the inherent powerlessness it implies. While a recent study¹⁴ in South India did explicate the potential dangers of social and economic empowerment of women in terms of increasing domestic violence rates, it did not focus on the meaning behind the term.

Based on interviews I conducted in North Indian ashrams, I propose the necessity to stray from these notions of "empowerment" and "disempowerment." Instead, in order to successfully address issues of human rights, it is more fruitful for organizations working on women's rights issues to identify and emphasize the personal power that many of the women possess, and work alongside them to facilitate their success. I will demonstrate through my field research that widow ashrams can benefit from recognizing the personal power of the women who live there and facilitating their success as individuals, rather than imposing a blanket model of empowerment on all women. In summary, there needs to be a shift from the ideology of empowering widows in ashrams, to an ideology of recognizing the inherent power they possess in leaving their homes. By shifting their ideologies in this way, ashrams can change the hierarchical structure they currently possess in helping widows become empowered, to a more facilitative approach where they work with the women to assess their personal needs.

Ashrams and Empowerment: narrative evidence of the mismatch

The concept of distinguishing these two ideologies for ashrams seems arbitrary until one examines their manifestations within a tangible context. An interview with Prem, a widow in *Ma-dham*, made the distinction quite clear:

When I was In Delhi, I was living with my son who would not work, and spent all the money I earned from working at the bank on alcohol, tobacco, and gambling. I had to leave him and so I asked my assistant to find out names of ashrams for me. She found out about the Guild of Service and I left one night, without telling anyone in my family [...] In the ashram I am safe but I can no longer work or support myself. I cannot eat the food that I enjoyed cooking. I cannot pray at the temple whenever I wish to. I am grateful to have this place to stay, but I sometimes miss Delhi. Leaving my home was a hard decision.

(Prem, Personal interview. 23 June. 2008)

In Prem's narrative, it begins to become clear that to some extent there is a mismatch between the personal power she derives from the having the freedom to work and cook her own food, and the current model of empowerment she faces in the ashram (which emphasizes safety). However, before dismissing *Ma-Dham's* structure as universally oppressive from an outsider's point of view, it is important to see what other women think of the ashram. When talking to older widows who are unable to cook or work, *Ma-dham* is a haven—the structure provides the support and empowerment they need to survive. This notion is evident in an interview with another widow in *Ma-Dham*, Menka:

When I was younger I used be a dancer, a librarian, an artist, and a poet. Now look at me, I can barely wash my own hair, or cook my own food. I wish I could go back home. But at least here they give me food and money so that I can live in peace.

This interview, while still expressing distaste with the structure of the ashram, also shows that in some ways the model of care and safety that *Ma-Dham* provides is necessary if the widow is unable to perform certain tasks in order to live a good life. What is especially interesting to hear are the accounts of women who are not widowed, yet living among the widows in *Ma-Dham*. One example is Bharti, a young woman, age 26, for whom the ashram's model of empowerment was beneficial in some ways but not others:

I came here because my heart condition was giving me trouble. I tried working and I did for many years, but I had to come here to rest. At least here I do not have to worry about earning money to get food and shelter. I want to be able to work and one day be a police officer, but I need to recover first.

After gathering these interviews, I asked the founder of the *Ma-Dham*, Dr. Mohini Giri, what her definition of empowerment is. She replied that empowerment is “the absence of fear” (Giri M. Personal interview. 16 July 2008). According to her vision and definition of the term, the ashram accomplishes just that. Generally, it is not explicitly clear whether the ashram best serves an individual widow, but through interviewing her, one can better understand her needs and how the ashram can best facilitate them.

Conversely, another ashram, *Chetan Bihar*, prescribes a model of empowerment that emphasizes freedom over the safety of the widows. Structurally, the unguarded nature of the building, presented as an embedded segment of the city, allows a different set of options for the widows: the ability to work, cook, and leave at their own will. For a widow like Maya, *Chetan Bihar* was an ideal home after her husband passed away, and her two daughters were married:

I really enjoy living here because it is better than a boarding house. At least here, I do not have to pay and nobody tells me what to do. [...] Everyday I go to the bhajanashrams and play the accordion and sing to Lord Krishna. [...] This is the best stage of my life. I liked being married; then when my husband died, I enjoyed raising my daughters. Now, I am alone, but I love it. I can do anything I want.

(Maya. Personal interview. 1 July. 2008)

For Maya, *Chetan Bihar's* model of empowerment mirrors her own sense of personal power and fit her needs. However, it is now clear that the ashram does not create a space that is empowering for women who would be unable to perform these tasks of basic sustenance. For example, Seema was not as satisfied with her life in *Chetan Bihar*:

I am too old to go out and work in the city like many of these younger women do. I have trouble cooking so sometimes I just ask my roommate to cook for me. The people here are very nice, but it is hard for me to live here.

In all, the assumption made by ashrams that the people they serve need to be empowered, is faulty on the basis that no distinction is made between various methods of facilitating the success of the women they serve: what kind of personal power and improvement are these women looking for, if any? Both *Chetan Bihar* and *Ma-dham* assume one view of empowerment for all the women (freedom and safety, respectively),

regardless of their individual backgrounds. Therefore, a segment of their widows will always be affected negatively by the assumptions made by the ashram in their model of empowerment.

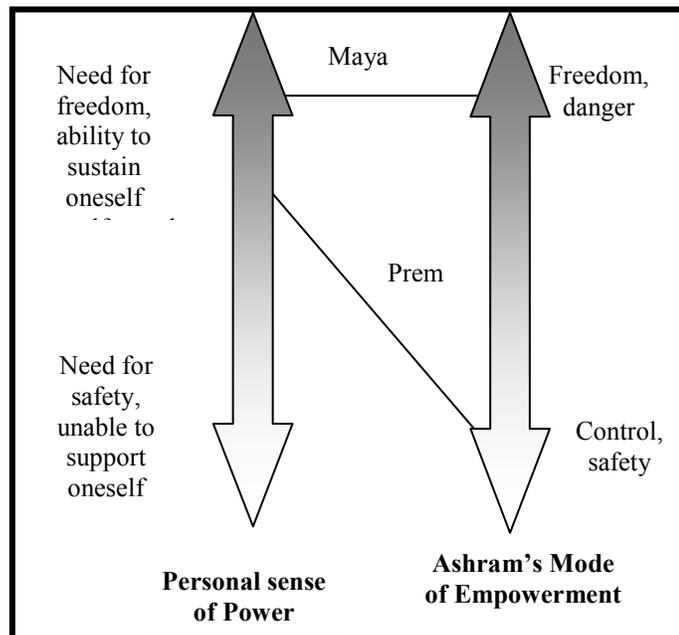


Figure 1. The greater the slope when connecting the woman's "personal sense of power" to the "external mode of empowerment", the greater the mismatch between her needs and the ashram.

Media Assignment of Empowerment

These various constructions of empowerment are largely shaped by the popular global views that distinguish between what it means to be oppressed and what it means to have power. Contributing to this occurrence is the sensationalization of widowhood in the media. Instead of allowing power to be determined by individuals, recent films and articles have designated all widows as a group who needs to be empowered, implying that they are at some point powerless. A closer examination of these popular beliefs reveals generalizations that are increasingly being adopted by the global community, leading to a phenomena that can be interpreted as a type of colonization targeted specifically towards Indian widows; one with positive intentions but dangerous consequences.

The BBC article "India's neglected widows"¹⁵, the CNN story "Shunned from society, widows flock to city to die,"¹⁶ and the Indian Express piece "They flock to Vrindavan with the crushing weight of widowhood"¹⁷ all emphasize the assumed tragedy of widowhood in a way that inevitably creates an Othering effect. The articles presume definitions of self-power that deemphasize individual experience in order to create a unified, enticing story. From phrases like "neglected," "shunned," "and "crushing weight of widowhood," the reader is made to associate pity, rather than understanding, with widowhood. The widows are uniformly represented as powerless, and seeking an external savior.

The articles delve into statements about how the widows in Vrindavan are ostracized by society, unwanted by their families, and dejected by unforeseen life circumstances. While this may be true for many women, it is certainly not the case for every widow in Vrindavan. Nearly one quarter of the women I interviewed in the various ashrams were not widowed—they were simply posing as widows. The women ranged from being married, to divorced, to unmarried, to runaways from unsuccessful marriages. Bharti was a woman of 26 who ran away from her husband after being accused of cheating on him. Namita was a woman of 45 who decided that she could not live a life close to *bhagwan* (God) while remaining in the same house as her husband. Roshan was a woman in her seventies who never married. In fact, in *Chetan Bihar*, there were numerous women who had husbands and families, but lived in the ashram as a source of income and food to send back home. Essentially, there were as many stories as there were women in the ashrams. The main differences were the extent to which their external empowerment matched their personal needs. It seems that the degree to which the two complemented each other determined the happiness and satisfaction of the individual woman.

In essence, then, the problem in popular articles and movies like Deepa Metha's *Water*¹⁸, and Dharan Mandrayar's *White Rainbows*¹⁹, is the manner in which they disregard and homogenize individual experience. As outsiders to the issue, we approach the complex and indefinite nature of widowhood with a false sense of certainty and a preconceived system of beliefs. Furthermore, assigning a stagnant set of characteristics to a group of people, in this case widows, immediately makes them the Other. In fact, the various issues faced by widows in India are shared by individuals in the United States: for example, women undergoing domestic violence, and the aging population. However, the media largely presents the issues as specific to widows, making them seem powerless, and the surrounding community seem implacable.

Conclusion

In all, I found that the vague sense in which the term *empowerment* was overused, led to a homogenization of widowhood experiences and narratives in northern India. This normalization led to ineffective ashrams in the sense that they ignored the needs of the individual women and provided a blanket form of empowerment for all. For example, the model of freedom provided by *Chetan Bihar*, led to an inability for older widows who could not work to take care of themselves. I propose the need for widow ashrams in Northern India to look specifically at the needs of individual widows and either shape the resources in the ashram to better suit the women, or simply refer the women to an ashram that fits their needs more closely. Additionally, rather than handing down resources to the widows, there needs to be a shift towards working with the women and helping them accomplish their own self-identified goals.

¹ An ashram is a community formed for the personal, and often spiritual, uplifting of the people living within the group.

² Sindoor is a red powder applied to either the forehead or the parting-line of a woman's hair when she is married. It signifies and distinguishes a currently married woman.

³ Zola, Emile. *The Laws of Manu*. Trans. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty and Brian K. Smith. New York: Penguin Books, Limited, 1991.

⁴ A patrilocal system of marriage is one in which the woman, once married, moves to the house of her in-laws with her husband.

⁵ Brahmin is the highest caste in the Hindu caste system and includes teachers, scholars, and priests. The other castes, in order, include: Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders), and Shudras (agriculturists, laborers)

⁶ Chakravarti, Uma. "Wifhood, widowhood and adultery: Female sexuality, surveillance and the state in the 18th century Maharashtra." Contributions to Indian Sociology 29 (1995): 14.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 16

⁸ Chakravarti, Uma. "Conceptualizing Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class, and state." Economic and Political Weekly 28 (1993): 579-85.

⁹ Chen, Martha Alter. Perpetual Mourning : Widowhood in Rural India. New York: Oxford UP India, 2001.

¹⁰ Sati is a practice of forced or voluntary widow-burning upon her husband's funeral pyre. The practice was banned in 1829 but had to be banned again in 1956 after a post-colonial resurgence.

¹¹ Bhajanashrams are temples that widows frequent twice a day to chant prayers and holy songs in order to earn two to three rupees and raw ingredients for cooking. Oftentimes, people will donate food, clothing, or blankets to these ashrams to distribute to the widows.

¹² "The meaning of women's empowerment: new concepts from action." Harvard Series on Population and International Health (1994): 127-38. One Source. Stanford Green Library, Stanford.

¹³ Breton, Margot. "On the Meaning of Empowerment and Empowerment-Oriented Social Work Practice." Social Work With Groups 17 (1994): 23-37.

¹⁴ Rocca, Corinne H. "Challenging assumptions about women's empowerment: social and economic resources and domestic violence among young married women in urban South India." Int. J. Epidemiol. (2008): 1-9

¹⁵ McGivering, Jill. "India's Neglected Widows." BBC 2 Feb. 2002.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1795564.stm>.

¹⁶ Damon, Arwa. "Shunned from society, widows flock to city to die." CNN 5 July 2007.
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¹⁷ Gopinath, Vrinda. "They Flock to Vrindavan with the crushing weight of widowhood." India Express 26 Feb. 2006.

¹⁸ Water. Dir. Deepa Mehta. Perf. Lisa Ray and John Abraham. DVD. 20th Century Fox, 2006.

¹⁹ White Rainbow. Dir. Dharan Mandrayar. Perf. R.S. Shivaji and Virendhra Saxena. DVD. Indican, 2007.

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