



Caste System, Widows and their Representations in Indian Society: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: India has recorded the highest number of widows in the entire world and in the patriarchal culture. They generally represent as a marginalized group that compounded by the cultural and social restrictions. Most widows in India are excluded from any interaction in social spaces - private and public - and suffer socially and financially. The social and cultural norms discourage widows from remarriage and impose various restrictions on diet, behaviours, wearing of clothes, ornaments and widows are often unwelcome at social events and religious festivals and avoided by others because they are considered bad luck. The phenomenon of widowhood is an under researched area in India, and interviewing 60 widows in the state of Odisha, the present paper aims to describe the representation of widow in India with reference to caste system. The finding indicates that the socio-cultural position of widows is not in a good condition. Widows belong to upper caste face many social and cultural taboos in everyday life including use of material objects and exclusion from their society members which she bounds to follow and obey, if no, she will be treated as bad woman or as a witch. It is also found that based on caste widows' different social representation, physical representation and religious representation are made.

Keywords: Social Representation, Physical Representation, Religious Representation, Widow

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Introduction

A woman who has lost her husband by death and not married is called a 'widow' (Ranjan, 2001). India has recorded the highest number of widows in the entire world and in the patriarchal culture. They generally represent as a marginalized

group that compounded by the cultural and social restrictions. Most widows in India are excluded from any interaction in social spaces - private and public - and suffer socially and financially. In the Indian society the social and cultural norms discourage widows from remarriage and impose various restrictions on diet, behaviours, wearing of clothes, ornaments and widows are often unwelcome at social events and religious festivals and avoided by others because they are considered bad luck. There are also a variety of customs, norms, practices, beliefs, and institutions that affect the economic, social, and political opportunities and the socio-cultural status of the widows (Chen, 2000). The 2011 census data indicates that there were 5.6 crore (4.6 percent of total population) are widowed with women outnumbering men (Census of India, 2011).

Widowhood is a universal phenomenon and it is influenced by the socio-cultural practices and geographical boundaries. Widows all over the world are bound up with patriarchal assumptions and at the same time, it has multiple cultural practices that mark the phenomenon of widowhood in different contexts. Studies of Chen (2000), Dasgupta (2017) indicates that widows that usually refers as “vidhava” in India faces many unnatural and unreasonable socio-cultural restrictions that caused physical and mental suffering. The plight of the widow is truly tragic, almost inevitably, it carries with it health problems, isolation and depression in addition to lack of money, unemployment and stressful socialization, and deteriorating relationships with one’s own children and friends. In all cultures, widowhood is a crisis in a woman’s life because of economic hardship and cultural isolation.

Widows’ deprivation and stigmatization have been exacerbated by ritual and religious symbolism. The widows are shaped by the religious customs and it is believed that the husband is God and devotion to him is of crucial significance not only in life but also in death (Dasgupta, 2017). As it is documented in studies, widow discrimination in India has along history; for example; Ahmad (2009), in ancient Hindu law, the concept of *stridharma* entails a woman’s devotion to her husband. This signifies women’s duties, roles, and moral responsibilities. According to this ancient law a husband is a sort of God for women, and in fact Sawaami, the Sanskrit word for husband, means literally “Lord and Master.” Families often believe that any “immoral” act by the wife damages her husband’s spirit”. From time immemorial, widows have been victims of a patriarchal system, without challenging it. Friere (1993) describes this as a culture of silence among the dispossessed, which perpetuates their oppression. Today, in spite of changes that treat them equal to married women, the widows are deprived of the necessities which every human being has a right to enjoy. Being a widow, she is sometimes deprived of basic

comforts and discriminated socially and culturally in both private and public spaces. She also considered as inauspicious witches who have eaten out their husband's life. Attitudes to and treatment of widows varies from relatively from one caste to another and in this context, the present study aims to explore the representation of widows in Indian society and how it varies across to castes in India.

Widows in Indian Society

In Indian society widowhood has long been associated with victimization and leads them to vulnerable group (Mehta, 2006; Utz, 2002; Bharathi, 2015) and the vulnerability is associated with the caste system. For example; the study of Sarkar and Sarkar (2007) indicates that Brahmin caste widows face more restrictions on food, dress and socio-cultural participation compared to other castes, however, two things that widows in all castes have in common are a decline in their social standing and unstable finances. Moreover, inter-sectionality research demonstrates that widows from marginalized caste face compounded forms of discrimination and disadvantage. Studies of Kumar and Correa (2012) and Sengupta and Chakrabarti (2011) have shown that widows belonging to lower castes, such as Dalits, face higher levels of social stigma, economic deprivation, and exclusion from higher castes. The situation of widows is very painful, as Sahoo (2014) indicates that orthodox Hindus believe that consumptions of onions, garlic, pickles, potatoes, and fish may fuel sexual passions by stimulating the blood and widows are not allowed to consume these foods.

According to Agarwala (2013) widowhood is often viewed through a lens of superstition and cultural taboo in Indian society and this deep-rooted belief regarding the inauspicious nature of widows contribute to their ostracism and social exclusion. Widows are often considered bearers of bad luck and are subjected to discriminatory treatment, including restrictions on participation in social and religious ceremonies. The cultural stigma and discrimination faced by widows in India have profound psychological consequences, contributing to feelings of shame, guilt, and worthlessness. Studies have shown that widows experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress compared to married women (Srinivasan and Bedi, 2007). The constant threat of social censure and the internalization of negative stereotypes further erode widows' sense of self-worth and agency, perpetuating cycles of despair and hopelessness. Widows seem to follow rules based on tradition because they have internalized them. They keep doing what other widows did without asking, resigned to a kind of fate—such as placing restrictions on their own diets. Discrimination and abuse of widows of all

ages, occurs across culture, religions, ethnic groups, regions, irrespective of their economic status. Widows are considered as inauspicious witches who have eaten out their husband's, seen as a stigma, blemished person, to be punished and isolated at worst and avoided and pitied at best.

Reddy (2004) described that a Hindu woman's widowhood is considered as a punishment for the crime committed by her in a previous life, hence she is a sinner. Widowhood among upper caste is a state of social death and once a person ceases to be a wife ceases to be a person. Whether young or old, widowed women leave behind their colourful saris, part with their jewellery and even shave their heads, if they are on the more conservative tradition. All of this is designed so as not to encourage male gaze. Moreover, Chen (2000) reports that, words for widows are often derogatory, such as "Witches" or "Dakshas". Woman has been labelled as 'witches' and it is often the widows who are most vulnerable, single and articulate become victims of such a system.

As observed, widows' faces isolation from mainstream society and this causes susceptible to abuse. Early modern society had only a few roles carved out for women. A girl typically moved from being a daughter to a wife and mother. While these three roles were different from one another and came with different responsibilities, they were all subject to men's authority in some way. The subjugation of daughters, wives, and mothers allowed for them to function within the society. When a woman could no longer fit into of these roles, she was met with numerous conflicts. The death of a woman's husband dramatically altered her place in society because a widow challenged the dominant ideals by living with without a father or husband's authority (Sarkar and Sarkar, 2007). In the journey of a girl's life the most measurable time for her to become a widow, because of "*sati daba* system", "widow's exploitation" etc. are some of the examples of plight of a widow from during the period between sixteenth and seventeenth century and also, it is still going on (Trivedi, 2009). According to Sahoo (2014) a woman's identity is dependent upon her husband; her sole purpose of life is to obey and worship this "God"; her prayers and worship are directed towards preserving husband's life and his early death is 'due to certain sins of hers', for which she must atone for the rest of her life. Thus, the death of the husband symbolizes "social death" of a woman, which we have explored in the present study.

Methods Used

The present study is conducted in Cuttack district of Odisha state, India and using the purposive sampling method authors selected 60 widows for the interviews.

The sample size was divided into two categories i.e. the age between 30-50 years and above 50 years and 30 samples from each group were selected. The research approach employed a qualitative and explorative methodology, encompassing semi-structured interviews, observations, and case studies. Semi-structured interviews collected personal information, age, caste, class, occupation, food pattern, number of children, dress pattern and ornaments, type of family, ritual performed after husband's death, reason of husband's death and it also allowed participants to freely express their perspectives on experience of widowhood and societal behaviour towards them. During the interviews, through the observation methods authors also collected information on their behaviours, dress pattern, ornaments, their process of socialization, discrimination they faced among others. These observations were systematically recorded through extensive field notes in a diary and audio recordings, which were later transcribed. Each interview lasted for about 40 to 45 minutes.

Results

The socio demographic characteristics of widow women of study area indicate that majority of women (43 out of 60) were married in between the 15-20 years and rest were married after the age of 20 years. Similarly, when we asked regarding their widowhood, it is observed that 30 women became widow after 5 to 7 years of marriage, 20 women became widow after 8 years of marriage and only 10 women reported they became widow after one to 2 years of marriage. Regarding the educational qualifications of widows, 9 were illiterate, 18 widow educated upto primary level, 26 studied upto matriculate level and only 7 were studied upto graduation level. On caste composition, the data indicates that 19 widows belong to Brahmin caste, 16 belongs to Khsetriya caste, 11 widows belong to Vaishya caste and 14 widows belong to lower caste (Sudra).

Food Habits

It is evident that when a woman became widow three important changes experienced by the widow, such as food habits, dressing pattern and facial makeup. From our data, it is observed that 41 widows eat pure vegetarian food and lastly 19 widows said they eat non vegetarian food. When it asked respondents about their food habits before the widowhood, out of 60 respondents 43 were taking non-vegetarian food. As observed in study, the member of the society told that widows are not allowed to eat non-vegetarian food like onion and garlic because in this

way they expressing their mourning and devotion to their deceased husbands. Eating non-vegetarian food was often seen as indulgent or inappropriate for a widow who was expected to lead a simple and austere life after her husband's death. Our analysis on caste system indicates that Brahmin caste widows followed strict food restriction compared to other caste widows. For example, Brahmin caste widows not allowed taking onion, garlic and spicy foods and they are also obligated to observe fasting (Ekadasi) in every 15 days to purify themselves. In the night they eat only fruits. However, there is no such restriction for widows of other castes. The changes in food habits among the interviewed food habits has affects them physically and psychologically as we observe in the case of Sunita, a 37 years old widow, who married at the age of 20 years and she became widow at the age of 31years:

"I love non-vegetarian but after my husband's death the family members and neighbours force me to don't take non-veg though you are a widow your whole soul and mind you should dedicate to God, by this way you express your love and respect for your husband. They told me that non-veg is a luxurious food and you should avoid it".

Chanda a 68 years old widow, married at the age of 19 and became widow after 11 years marriage, narrated:

"Since last 38 years the non-vegetarian vanished in my life as my husband died, my family members restricted me to eat those food including spicy foods. For me current food pattern is ok, as I have lost all my happiness and living a painful life, God is very cruel to me".

Representation of Widows

According to the research the socio-cultural position of widows is not in a good condition. Widows belong to upper caste face many social and cultural taboos in everyday life including use of material objects and exclusion from their society members which she bound to follow and obey, if no she will be treated as bad lady or as a witch. Based on our field information and observation and the Indian caste system (Brahmin, Khetriya, Baishya and Sudra) we have analysed the representation of widows in society into three categories:

- Social representation
- Physical representation
- Religious representation

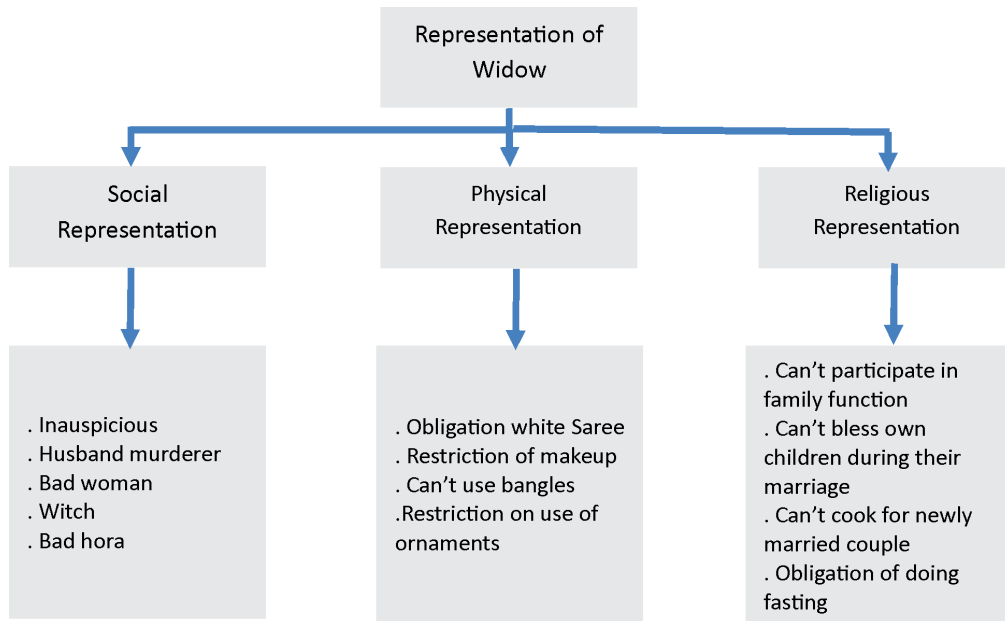


Figure 1: Representation of Widows in India

Social Representation of Widows

Widowhood in Hindu society as the field information shows these women suffer social and economic marginalization including negative societal behaviour. Out of interviewed 60 widows, all respondents were indicated that they have observed changes in the behaviours of family, neighbours and other societal people after their widowhood. They also represented; seeing a widow as in auspicious while going for any work or activities such as job/new job, purchase property, house construction, examination, for marriage proposal and business among others and it is believed that if anybody see a widow then his/her work will not be completed (**Figure 1**). Widows are not allowed to touch any objects that used during rituals like marriage ceremony, birth ceremony believing that it may cause impure and cannot be offered to God. Moreover, the society also do not allow a widow to meet newly married bride or groom, even if the bride may be her son or groom may be her daughter but she is not allowed meet at that time. In this regard, a 46-year-old widow Shneha, married at the age of 20 and became widow after 19 years of marriage. Currently she lived in a rental house with her son and the house owner is a businessman was a good friend Shneha's husband. When she lost her husband, the house owner and the neighbours maintained social distance and always avoided her to talk.

She also said:

“One day in the morning I was sitting in front of the house, the owner was about to leave to open a new shop in the city, as I was there, he was not coming out from the home and after few minutes, the house owner’s son came and asked me go inside the house as his father will go for a new business and don’t want to see my face. Listening to those words, it killed me inside, and I felt very bad and immediately ran away from that place”.

Moreover, as observed during the fieldwork, the Brahmin caste widows represented as “Randi Bramhuni” and during the month of Kartika (falls during the month of October–November) all Brahmin widows are solicited to observe fasting one time a day and dedicate their heart, mind, soul to God through prayer, meditation to obtain supernatural power from God. However, widows of other castes also face the same discrimination but they are not obliged to observe fasting during the month of Kartika. On fasting Bimala a Brahmin caste widow, who married at the age of 16 years and lost her husband after 6 years of marriage said:

“In our Brahmin caste girls marry at an early age. At the time of marriage, I was totally unknown about any rituals and practices. When I lost my husband, my mother-in-law told me to observe Ekadashi fasting, she has every Brahmin widow do for the betterment of husband’s soul. Before marriage, I listened to the Ekadashi fast but didn’t know how to do it or what the process to follow. At that time, everything seemed like a dream for me, and I didn’t believe that my husband was no more. My mother-in-law told me that in Ekadashi, widows worship Lord Vishnu and pray for their late husbands. In this way, a widow shows love and respect towards her husband and also proves her character (satitwa). Till the last breath of her life, she will pray for her husband, and no one else will come into her life. From that day on, I observe Ekadashi fast twice in a month for my late husband and worship Lord Vishnu”.

Physical Representation of Widows

Becoming widow not only brings the social changes or consequences but also it leads many physical changes. As discussed earlier, a married lady only permitted use vermilion (sindoor), red bangles, jewellerys and toe ring which also symbolizes as physical representation of marriage. However, at the death of husband all these symbols of married woman change and they forced to use white cloth, bare wrist, no makeup and restriction of ornaments and any kinds of jewellerys which symbolizes the physical representation of a widow.

Dressing Pattern

There is a wide difference on dressing pattern before and after widowhood. It is observed that majority 58 women uses white or light colour saree or dress after becoming widow, whereas only two women said they use colourful saree or dress. The society forced the widows to wear white, because white signs of mourning for herself and purity for husband, white symbolize of purity. Similarly, widow women are not allowed to use bangles in their hand, only few old ladies use golden or silver colour bangles. In this regards, Nayana, who married at the age of 17 years and became widow after 4 years of marriage said:

“After the death of my husband I lost all colours in my life...as people from society said I have lost all happiness and enjoyment... as all these doesn't exist so there is no use of wearing colour saree.... moreover, as the societal norms said as a widow, I have to wear white saree otherwise it hurts my husband soul. Although I am not interested to wear, but I am bound with societal norms and have no options”.

Facial Makeup

Our interviews and non-participants observation information indicates that custom was followed most strictly in the widow community. As reported by the widows, after the death of their husband, women were asked to remove sindoor (vermillion) from their head including bindia from the forehead. In Hindu culture vermillion signs as property of Goddess (devi) and it is used in every ritual and festivals and it also believe that Sindoor and red glass are the only things that tie up both husband and wife, so after the death of husband there is no use of these. Widows also not allowed to use any kinds of makeup like facial foundation, cream, eye linear, nail polish, lipstick, flower on head etc; as we can see in the case of Chumki 27 years old became widow at the age of 24 years said:

“Being a girl I want to looks beautiful, have makeup, use colourful dress etc; but for a widow beautifying herself is a dream in our society. If a widow put any facial makeup, then people questioned about her character and gossip and tell that I am a shameless woman. Because of these kinds of comments, I forgot all my happiness and to whom I will say that I love to makeup myself and love to wear coloured saree, no one is here to listen to me.”

Religious Representation of Widow

Widows in Indian society never allowed participating in any kind of auspicious rituals like child birth ceremony, marriage ceremony or any kind of family functions

or social functions. A widow can observe the rituals in a distance but not allowed to touch the objects that used in the process of rituals and it happened across the all castes. Even a widow mother doesn't allow blessing her daughter or son who is going to marry and the people also said widow mother shouldn't show her face to her children in case of any auspicious work is going in the home as it may bring bad vibes to the family, as Lalita narrate, married at the age of 17 years, and after 23 years she lost her husband and said:

"I know I'm a widow, but at the same time a mother also. For society, a widow is represented as inauspicious, but for my children I am not an inauspicious lady. My neighbours and family members' behaviour always tease me that I am inauspicious and not allowed to perform any rituals, and that's why when my son got married, they didn't allow me to participate in any rituals and even when my daughter in law came to home, I was also not allowed to see her face believing that I may bring bad luck for the new bride. I believe I can do it forcefully as they are my children, but if I do all those than my other family members may fight with and it create unnecessary quarrel and discontent among the family and other members. Moreover, I may face social exclusion".

As observed during the fieldwork, widows suffer different types of discrimination and social exclusion across the castes, although it is more rigid in the higher caste (Brahmin). The community members indicates that; a widow can't participate in any kind of rituals or auspicious work, as our religion considered her as impure and also bound to obey the social taboos. According to Swarnamayee a 38 years old widow, her husband was a businessman and died due to Covid, she narrated:

"Everyone one knows the reason of my husband's death still people blamed me and tell that I am a witch and killed my husband. In our sahi (colony) whole members celebrate the Laxmi Puja in the month of Margashira (December), but after the demise of my husband, I am not allowed to worship the Laxmi goddess, and even on that everybody in the community avoid me to talk and do not involve me rituals as I am an inauspicious lady. Really this behaviour hurts me a lot, I have not yet understood what is fault.....".

Discussion

The present study aims to explore the representation of widows and how it varies across to castes in Indian society and our finding indicates that widows are a socially excluded group and often they deprived with many socio-cultural practices by the people. The study has observed certain trends on the representation of widows such as; Social representation, Physical representation and Religious representation and

they faced a wide range of difficulties depending on her caste. For example, Vatak (1995) indicates that higher caste widows such as of Bhramin caste they do not have financial access, all financial matter taken by their in-laws or other family members. They forced to use the white saree, without facial makeup and abstain from all “hot,” vegetarian meals forced to eat rice just once in a day and a quantity that nearly amounted to fasting to avoid body adornments, and lead a life of celibacy. Moreover, widows also represent as inauspicious and everybody try to avoid see her face before leaving the home. Chen and Dreze (1995) noted that widows suffered very negative societal behaviour. People use different kinds of symbolic violence such as uses of slang languages such as “Randi”, husband killer, witch, son eater etc. it is also observed that in some parts of the country Brahmin widows are expelled by her family members from the village and asked to live and worked in a nearby town(Nicholson, 1994). To the fact that widows are often considered as social evil and because of that in many cases as documented in the study they do not receive any financial, social, emotional support from the husband’s family. As documented by the widows during the study, some of them received these from their natal family (Nicholson 1994; and Joan Scott 1988, 1993).

Studies of Ranjan (2001), Thomas (2021), Sahoo (2014) indicates that widows are often pressured to follow defensive measures meant to restrict their sexuality, such as eating vegetarian diets and rice only once a day, fasting on the eleventh day of the lunar month, wearing white, and giving up bodily adornments. The widow’s diet was claimed to decrease blood, reduce sexual desire, make the body cool (*thanda*), make the widow thin and ugly and prevent her from wanting any man by both men and women. These eating rules were originally designed to prevent young widows’ bodies from becoming hot (*garam*), and so ruining their character (*swabhab*) and social-moral order (*dharma*). Similarly, widows are also not allowed use vermilion on their forehead and don’t allow to wear red bangles because it’s the only sign of married women as Fruzzetti (1982), Meheta et.al (2006) described married women uses vermilion and red bangles aimed towards protecting the longevity and well-being of their husbands and as the husband is no more so they restricted to have such practices. Widows are often also unwelcome at social events, ceremonies and rituals are avoided socially because they are considered bad luck, in part because of their association with death. Sati is the most extreme example of such practices, although the evidence suggests it is extremely uncommon and infact has never been very widespread.

Another custom which still prevail in many parts of the country is that restricts a widow from leading a normal life with her family and shaving off their head.

Vijayalaxmi (2009) and Ranjan (2001) stated that a widow is expected to look unattractive and any article or clothing that makes her look otherwise has no place in her life. Chakravarti (1998) and Mitra (2000) points out that remove hair has the most mystical association; as it is a symbol of beauty, power and generally it attracts men. A shorn head is conversely symbolic of the loss of beauty and power of attraction. Moreover, widows of all caste suffer from limited freedom to participate in religious and auspicious social functions. They carry the stigma of inauspiciousness and hence, have to keep away from functions, people believe that if a widow participates in any auspicious function something bad may happened, they are also not allowed to touch those objects used during marriage or religious ceremonies. A widow cannot cook rice to feed to a newly married bride or bridegroom, nor can attend or even witness a marriage ceremony. In fact, a widow is not even entitled to perform the ritual to welcome her own daughter-in-law. Once, veteran women's rights activist Mohini Giri who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 said; widowhood is a state of *social death* and they are still accused of being responsible for their husband's death, and they are expected to have a spiritual life with many restrictions which affects them both physically and psychologically. The representation of widow in the society explains show she has imbibed the pativrata concept; the honour of the family concept; and how conscious she is of her rights and socio-cultural duties that determines her actual status. The findings of our study reveal that representation of widowhood is more caste based and it has certain socio psychological connotations which run through all castes. It is understood in diverse ways by widows of various castes experiences discrimination and socio-cultural exclusion and widowhood issue has laid bare the entire structure of widowhood, which belongs to a larger patriarchal structure. It has much to do with how the woman travels from being a girl-child towards her journey into wifehood and finally into widowhood.

Conclusion

This research paper has explored the deplorable situation faced by widows of different castes in India from a number of angles, including socioeconomic, cultural stigma and discrimination. It is clear from a thorough examination of these factors that widows in India still experience structural injustices and restrictions that compromise their agency, dignity, and rights. In this present study the status of widows decided by their caste, and the higher caste widows (Brahmin) face more restrictions than the other caste. Widows are likely to suffer, (in silence), extreme and systematic physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence both within

their families, and in the outside community. Across regions, religions, cultures, caste and class, widows can be stigmatized as bringing bad luck as inauspicious or the evil eye. This present study focuses on social, physical and religious representations of widows and the effects of societal behaviour and result shows that because of the tradition and social rules that initiated for widows, they are represented as bad women or inauspicious in every aspect, although at present society pretend that widows live a free life, have no restrictions in food, cloth, facial makeup, ornaments and they can do what they want. But the fact is that the mind setup of people has not changed as there is lack of social awareness, the vivid presence of caste that decide the status of a widow in the society.

Note

1. Kartik is the 8th lunar month in Hindu calendar

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