

Braj Bhoomi: A Scenario of Penury, Starvation & Humiliation of the Bengali Women

(With Special Reference to the Bengali Women in Vrindavan, Goverdhan, Radhakund, Barsana & Gokul)

Abstract

Despite the fact that most of the people in the world find the twenty-first century a century that has numerous boons to all the people of all the age groups and classes, the Bengali women that have been living in the Brajbhoomi for years, are more or less still the same as before, that is, living on the mercy of those who provide them shelter as maid-servants or as chanters at the various ashrams. Indeed, the social scenario of the Brajbhoomi is incomplete without the Bengali women who form a remarkable part of the society of the Brajbhoomi that includes the towns and cities like Vrindavan, Mathura, Goverdhan, Barsana, Radha Kund, Gokul, Mahavan, Nandgaon etc. The picture of the Bengali women is horrible at all these places. The concepts of women empowerment, reservation for women, right to education, public health etc. do not seem to have reached them. The causes that force them to spend their whole life here are many, but it is chiefly poverty or penury that drives them away from their sheltering places quite early in the morning, say at about 4 A.M. to the houses, ashrams and temples seeking food, clothing and other donations.

The paper is an empirical study of the Bengali women in Vrindavan (Mathura). Through the paper an attempt has been made to produce a realistic picture of such women who depend for their existence on others. The findings acclaim the entire Brajbhoomi 'the land of the penury, starvation and humiliation of the Bengali women'. The paper equally highlights the facts that the human rights of the cow-like-bowine Bengali women are not being protected by the government agencies.

Keywords: Brajbhoomi, Pilgrimage, Hub of Tourism, Penury, Humiliation, the Bengali Women.

Introduction

Brajbhoomi is a region mainly in Uttar Pradesh of India, around Mathura-Vrindavan. It is considered to be the land of Krishna and is derived from the Sanskrit word vraja. Covering an area of about 3,800 km today, Brajbhoomi can be divided into two distinct units - the eastern part in the trans-Yamuna tract with places like Gokul, Mahavan, Sadabad, Baldeo, Mat and Manigarhi (Nauhjheel) Bajna; and the western side of the Yamuna covering the Mathura region that encompasses Vrindavan, Govardhan, Kusum Sarovar, Barsana and Nandgaon. The residents or natives of Braj are called Brijwasi. Braj bhasha or Brij bhasha, closely related to spoken Hindi with a soft accent is spoken throughout the region. Region is closely related to the Hindu epic Mahabharata. Krishna is said to have spent his childhood and adolescence in Braj and therefore, it has an important status in Hinduism. Krishna performed his numerous pastimes popularly called his leelas in the 137 sacred forests, at the 1000 Kunds, on the numerous holy hills and on the banks of the river Yamuna, but unfortunately, now the vast heritage of the region is thought to be deteriorating. Out of the 1000 kunds which used to be the source of fresh and potable drinking water source and rain water harvesting, 90% of them have dried and silted up, encroached upon and reduced to sludge tanks. Out of the 137 forests, only 3 are left and the rest have been cut down. Out of the 27 picturesque ghats on the

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banks of river Yamuna, only one remains and rest have been encroached upon and smuggled out. Due to the wide scale illegal mining of Braj hills, the heritage spots associated with Krishna are being lost. There is an overall destruction of the most culturally vibrant and heritage region of Vaishnavas, Hindus, Indians and mankind on the whole. However, even to this day, the Braj towns like Vrindavan, Mathura, Goverdhan, Barsana, Gokul, Nandgaon etc. are very popular and have hundreds and thousands of the visitors from all around the world everyday. The love of the people for these places is to such an extent that many of them have settled down here for ever for the sake of spiritual peace and meditation. Of the people who have settled down here, the highest number is of the Bengalis, especially the Bengali widows who find the entire Braj region the safest sheltering place. They give up their own homes and family members, and spend the rest of their life here serving the Brajwasis or in the piety of Lord Krishna.

Besides the other distinct features of its own, the twenty-first century in India is known for the process of women-empowerment which aims at empowering every woman of the country to make herself financially independent. Through the reservation policy to her, it allows her to prove her potential in the various fields. But the Bengali women in the Braj region witness the bitter truth that they are still forced to live on the mercy of others. Most of them can be seen begging, working at the restaurants, tea-stalls, hotels or at the homes of the Brajwasis. Some of them join the various branches of Bhajanashrams in order to survive themselves. They always find themselves surrounded by poverty, penury, humiliation, exploitation, starvation, beggary etc. All the tall talks of human rights, equality and economic independence fail in their case because they are still too far away from them. Vrindavan continues to be a haven for many widows who prefer it to the stifling orthodoxy of their villages. Though food security is not a problem anymore, a lot still needs to be done in terms of social attitudes, access to government schemes, services and facilities. These are two contrasting facets not just of Vrindavan but of the entire Brajdhama. The first facet makes the people feel that the Bengali women in Vrindavan are leading a life of contentment, but the other facet lets others feel that they are not as happy as they seem to be. In the entire Brajbhoomi, it is a common sight to see hundreds of Bengali widows searing a single piece of coarse white sari, with their heads shaven, with emaciated bodies and disillusioned faces, wearing rosary beads round their necks and wearing on their forehead a long sandal wood paste 'Tilak' that extends to their noses, either begging on the streets or outside the temples and ghats. In fact, behind the scenario of piety and devotion, there is the scenario of the penury, starvation and humiliation of the Bengali women, and especially of the Bengali widows who witness their presence in almost every house as maid-servants, outside every temple as beggars and at every public place waiting for some angel to help them make them free from their miseries.

Women in India are meant to be respected, but the scenario of the penury, starvation and humiliation of the Bengali women in the whole sphere which covers a wide area, prove it contradictory. The sociological thinkers, the economists, the men of politics and law in India should have a distinctly serious concern about it, and it can let them peep into the miseries they are facing there. Besides, the NGOs should also feel moved enough to work for their freedom from the shackles of the life which hardly knows any joy or happiness, and which knows only humiliation, harassment, insult, exploitation and starvation which finally forces them to spend their life as beggars, maid-servants or the members of one or the other branches of Bhagwan Bhajanashram. Indeed, like the other women of India they deserve human rights and respect, but the practice says that they are often deprived from them. How can we compliment ourselves on the issue of women empowerment when in Brajbhoomi alone thousands of young and widow married and widow Bengali women fail to get even the basic human rights they deserve. The efforts of the social workers, social thinkers and sociologists, men of politics and law are desirable definitely to help these women become a part of the process of women empowerment and join the main stream of the nation.

Review of Research and Development in The Subject

Women have always been the chief of the social and political thinkers. These days feminism is a worldwide movement to end sexism by empowering women. Branches of feminism include liberal feminism, its most mainstream and inclusive branch focusing on working within the system to end sexism; cultural feminism, focusing on positive qualities of women's roles; socialist feminism, focusing on ending sexism by eliminating capitalism and adopting socialist principles; radical feminism, calling for women to create separate, women-centered social institutions; multicultural or global feminism, working for change across national boundaries; and ecofeminism, focusing on environmental action. Feminist theory is one of the major contemporary sociological theories, which analyzes the status of women and men in society with the purpose of using that knowledge to better women's lives. Feminist theory is most concerned with giving a voice to women and highlighting the various ways women have contributed to society.

The Bengali women, and particularly the Bengali widows in the Brajbhoomi have always drawn the attention of the social thinkers and the advocates of the human rights. As a result of their initiatives, many researches and surveys have been made on them and many government policies have been made to facilitate them, but still much is left to be explored and considered for their betterment and upliftment.

National Commission for Women Report (2010) says "Vrindavan ... a place well known and revered as the birthplace of Lord Krishna. Also the dwelling of the widows, who to be helped need to pray and sing Bhajans, thus giving them the right to a free meal. Various studies on the issue have repeatedly highlighted the pitiable conditions of these women. In

a study sponsored by National Commission for Women in 1996 titled "The Widows of Vrindavan" it was estimated that at the time there were more than 5000 widows and destitute women in the city of Vrindavan, living in "pitiable and pathetic conditions" and having been abandoned by their families had no "financial, social or emotional support" I hope this report, based upon the Supreme Court directives to the Commission in the matter of, Environment & Consumer Protection Foundation Versus Union of India Writ Petition (Civil) No (s) 659 of 2007, would enable the Central and the State governments to take appropriate action to ameliorate the conditions of widows in Vrindavan.

Chiranjeevulu and Krishna Murty (2011) have described the role of women in the global scenario and at the national level in brief. They have observed that, the last decades have witnessed some basic changes in the status and role of women in Indian society. In 1993, the national government has provided one third political reservations to women in local bodies and implemented it. Later these one third reservations also extended to education and employment sectors. But still there is oppression of women and male dominance continues in the social system in many parts of India. Therefore, it is important to educate women, which will be the key to development. Policies should be framed to bring them into the mainstream of society. Women must be provided with better health care facilities so that they can take up challenges.

Rina Mukherji, NDTV Broadcast (23rd June, 2012) reports that widowhood has traditionally been dreaded in India, not only because it means a lowering of the status of any woman within the matrimonial home, but also because it is accompanied by several indignities. Widows in eastern and northern India must abstain from all non-vegetarian food — the staple of every meal in the region — and restrict themselves to just one meal a day. They must give up wearing nice clothes and jewellery, and take to coarse white saris. They may not socialise, and must not be seen at weddings and celebrations, lest they bring ill-luck. The nightmarish living conditions of the widows in Vrindavan, shown in the documentary, shake our belief in humanity to the core. Most of the so-called homes run for these women do not even have running water in their bathrooms. The administration does not bother to provide them food. The women must beg or sing bhajans in the bhajan ashram to earn their only meal of the day. Once they become old and weak, they are confined to a corner and left to die.

Soumitro Chakravarty, Anant & Amar Nath Jha (2013) in the paper 'Women's Empowerment in India: Issues, Challenges and Future Directions' observe that it is quite evident that the SHGs working in the region are excessively concentrating upon the income generation activities and this economic-centered focus is not translating into overall empowerment of women as far as their role in decision making and health related issues are concerned. To fulfill their true potential as a potent women empowerment tool SHGs should broaden

their horizon and view empowerment as a multi-dimensional social process giving due importance to allied issues such as women's health, their decision making role, access to basic health amenities & infrastructural facilities etc and therefore it is proposed that greater in depth research needs to be undertaken into SHGs so that more evidence can be obtained in order to ascertain the consistency and long-term accomplishments of SHGs as a potent tool for holistic women empowerment.

The Hindu, Editorial, Widows of Vrindavan (SEPTEMBER 22, 2014 01:05 IST). The 40,000 widows in Vrindavan are only a fraction of those in need of help. Instead of articulating what she as an MP or the Central or State government can do to help, Hema Malini seems to have placed the burden on the widows themselves and on the governments of their home-States. Other than asking any intending newcomers to stay back, the MP had no concrete suggestion to improve their lot. Worse, she appeared to be peddling a parochial view intended mainly to appeal to the voters of Mathura and directed against the poor widows who have no political constituency of their own. The MP seemed to be questioning the constitutionally guaranteed right of the widows to reside in a place of their choice — in this case, Vrindavan. The poor conditions of the Vrindavan widows recently came to the attention of the Supreme Court, which called for adequate food and improved hygienic conditions in the shelters housing them. The widows of Vrindavan need urgent help, but the last thing they want is their elected representative to push for their eviction rather than providing them some relief and dignity.

Sutirtha Sahariah (Feb 2017) observes that Shunned by their own families, thousands of Hindu widows make their way to the holy city of Vrindavan in northern India to find solace. But most also end up impoverished and neglected. The holy city of Vrindavan, in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, is believed to be the birthplace of the Hindu god Lord Krishna. It is also home to more than 10,000 widows, most of them destitute and neglected.

Objectives of the Study

1. To observe and study the scenario of beggary, drudgery, poverty and penury in the Brajbhoomi.
2. To observe the social, environmental and economic conditions of the life-style of the Bengali women in Vrindavan, Goverdhan, Radhakund, Barsana and Gokul.
3. To visit the streets and slums where they live and to observe and study the environmental problems being faced by them.
4. To be familiar with the past of the Bengali women in Vrindavan
5. To learn about their family system
6. To find out the causes of their settling down in the Brajbhoomi
7. To observe and explore the various capacities in which they work and earn their livelihood
8. To know about the places that provide them shelter and other help to meet out their needs.
9. To observe and study their daily routine

10. To learn from them about the efforts made by the Government and NGOs and other agencies for their upliftment and rehabilitation.
11. To peep into their miseries and the world of isolation
12. To learn from them about the efforts made by the National and State Human Rights Commissions for their betterment.
13. To know about their grievances
14. To find out what they require to survive honourably
15. To learn from them about the help (if any) they get from their relatives.

Hypothesis

1. The concept of human rights is working world-wide, then why it is not applicable to the Bengali women living in the Brajbhoomi.
2. Through the process of the women empowerment, efforts are being made to link the women of India to the main stream of development, then why the efforts are not being fruitful in the case of the Bengali women.
3. Several laws are there to protect the women, but in case of such women no law seems to be working there.
4. Child labour is banned and prohibited legally, but several minor and child Bengali girls can be seen working as labourers at the houses.
5. The Bengali women in the Brajbhoomi are not leading a respectable life, and that the adverse circumstances of their life often force them to join the life of drudgery and isolation which hardly knows any joy and happiness.
6. With the exception of few, all the Bengali women suffer from penury, starvation and humiliation.
7. Most of them are very active, regular and devoted, but the other aspect (which is probably the true aspect of their life) is that they are socially cut off and that they are generally treated only as servants with no liberty to ask for what they actually need.

Methodology

The study was conducted on 50 units of information, 10 each from Vrindavan, Goverdhan, Radhakund, Barsana and Gokul, selected randomly. Besides it, the researcher also visited the important spots in the Brajbhoomi where he could find more and more Bengali women. In order to keep up the scientific spirit, all the steps of scientific method were observed and followed. For the study, both the primary and the secondary data were used. The sources of the primary data were the schedule which comprises of about 20 questions touching all the major aspects of the Bengali women's life in the Brajbhoomi and interview of the Bengali men and women and of the local people. The secondary data were collected from the books, newspapers, survey and research reports, magazines. In order to arrive at a judicious generalization the researcher made semi-participant observation and stayed for hours among them for a sufficient time so that he could see them and their world of isolation quite closely. In order

to get a feedback of the previous studies and surveys, reviews were kept in mind; in order to make the work scientific, the whole process of social research which includes, the selection of the problem, review of literature, hypothesis, selection of the study area, selection of the units of information through random sampling technique, selection of the techniques of collecting primary data, collection, classification, analysis, interpretation and tabulation leading to generalization, was adopted.

Conclusion

The issue of the Bengali women, and particularly, the Bengali widows in the Brajbhoomi, is an international issue. Several studies have been made; several political leaders have assured about the reform in their condition; the members of the Human Rights Commission and the members of the Human Rights Commission for Women have shown their serious concern about them, but in vain, as their condition is still the same in the twenty first century as it would be in the previous centuries. The World Health Organization is likely to do something in their case. These women's life is hellish and it needs freedom from it. In this case, The WHO can play a dominant role. Besides it, UNICEF can also take some initiative in order to improve their health. The environmentalists all over the world need to ensure them a guarantee for a clean environment which can facilitate their living; the policy makers in the world need to formulate such laws as can protect the rights of such women, and as can prevent others from infringing their rights that they deserve as human beings and as women.

Most of them are either poor married women or widows, and their whole life is a touching and painful tale of suffering. Poverty, penury, drudgery, indefatigable hard work, tolerance, exploitation, beggary and household work at the houses constitute their destiny.

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