

**EXTENT OF WIDOWHOOD IN INDIA: A REVIEW OF CENSUS 2011****Dr. Sanhita Athawale***Principal**Shri Siddhivinayak College**Karve Nagar, Pune*Email Id: [prin.ssvmm@maharshikarve.org](mailto:prin.ssvmm@maharshikarve.org)**Savani Karade***Research Scholar**Department of Anthropology**Savitribai Phule Pune University*Email Id: [savanikarade@gmail.com](mailto:savanikarade@gmail.com)**Abstract**

Indian families are predominantly patriarchal. Males in the family are primary breadwinners and decision makers and have authority over other members and family property. Whereas females in the family are basically caregivers and look after children and household affairs. Certain demographic and personal circumstances outside one's control such as death of male partner, feminization of ageing, informal or legal disruption of marriage, long term migration of male members of the family, leads to drastic change in the family organization. According to Census of India, 2011, it was seen that there is tremendous increase in the number of Female maintained and Female Headed Households in the country. Major proportion of these households constitute of the households that are headed by widows.

India has recorded the largest number of widows in the World. It is recently estimated that there are around 40 million widows in India, which approximately constitutes 10% of total female population in the country.

This paper studies the increasing visibility of female widows in India. The specific objectives are to estimate and understand distribution of widows in India and to describe various profiles of widows in India. In the present study tables from, 'Data on Marital Status' from 'Population Enumeration Data' of Census of India, 2011 was referred and further analyzed for achieving better understanding of the social and economic condition of widows in India. Considering the scope of the study data about widows was curated from 3 tables- 1) Age group wise distribution of widows in urban and rural parts of the country. 2) Religion wise distribution of widows. 3) Age group wise widows who head their families.

Widowhood may be defined simply as the transition from one marital status to another. But due to the severe complexity of its consequences in our social setup it draws the attention of sociologists and demographers. The consequences of widowhood to a woman are more hazardous than to a man since the society imposes a lot of restrictions on women. The widow has to undergo deprivation in social, psychological, cultural and economic terms. Present study is an attempt to explain the extent and spread of widows in different parts of India with respect to their age, religion and household headship. It is rather unfortunate that though the cause of widows in our society has attracted the attention of many social reformers, society's attitude towards widows has not appreciably changed in past decades. In this context, it is very important that social workers, voluntary agencies and the

**This Research paper is based on major research project work sponsored by ICSSR, New Delhi**

*atmosphere for widow remarriages with the help of welfare organizations. The Government should also provide some kind of priority or reservation in jobs for widows and, at the same time, ensure self-employment by providing proper training and financial assistance.*

**Key words:** *Widowhood, Census, Population, Marriage.*

**Copyright © 2022 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial Use Provided the Original Author and Source Are Credited.

### **Widowhood in India**

Indian families are predominantly patriarchal. Males in the family are primary breadwinners and decision makers and have authority over other members and family property. Whereas females in the family are basically caregivers and look after children and household affairs. Certain demographic and personal circumstances outside one's control such as death of male partner, feminization of ageing, informal or legal disruption of marriage, long term migration of male members of the family, leads to drastic change in the family organization. According to Census of India, 2011, it was seen that there is tremendous increase in the number of Female maintained and Female Headed Households in the country. Major proportion of these households constitute of the households that are headed by widows.

India has recorded the largest number of widows in the World. It is recently estimated that there are around 40 million widows in India, which approximately constitutes 10% of total female population in the country.

The ordinary term for a widow in India is '*vidhwa*' which originates from the Sanskrit word '*vidhuh*' which means 'lonely, solitary and to be destitute'. The origin of the word itself shows the derogation and suffering. Even in contemporary society they are oppressed by norms, traditions and cultural expectation of the past.

### **Historical Background**

In ancient India or Vedic period, women had high esteem in the society. They availed the right to education, and liberty in the right of choice of the spouses ("*Swyamvar*"). The social norms for widowhood were flexible enough. A widow had several options like *Sahamarana* that is, voluntarily joining the dead husband on his funeral pyre. There was also the process of *Niyog*, referred as procedure through which a widow could conceive another man's child, if she desired to do so and thereafter spend the rest of her life nurturing the child. She could also opt for Brahmacharya, that is rigid celibacy. She also had the option of finding another spouse of her choice. But during the later Vedic age and the early medieval era, the status of women went on a downslide. Traditions like 'Sati' framed the patterns of social behavior for widows in Hindu society. The conduct towards them turned to be extremely unjust and sadistic. Conventionally, the widow was held responsible for her husband's death. Even the shadow of a widow was believed to inflict depredation and brought ill luck. It was also believed that once her husband died, the wife should pronounce all comforts of home. She should shave her head, wear a plain or red sari referred as '*Alwan*' as a sign of lamentation. This was particularly done to make the widow sexually unattractive, so that no man is attracted to her or she never gets married. The appearance of widows at rituals, ceremonies and celebrations was considered unpropitious. In independent India, we get another picture of widows, where they are single and work for a living, bring up children, cope with loneliness and pressures of urban and rural life (Sogani,

2002).

Present study refers the data from Census of India, 2011 to throw a light on various demographic aspects of widowhood in India.

### Research Methodology

The objectives of this paper are to study the increasing visibility of female widows in India. The specific objectives are to estimate and understand distribution of widows in India and to describe various profiles of widows in India. In the present study tables from, 'Data on Marital Status' from 'Population Enumeration Data' of Census of India, 2011 was referred and further analyzed for achieving better understanding of the social and economic condition of widows in India.

The tables that were used are follows: Census of India, 2011, 'C-2 Marital Status By Age And Sex (India & States/UTs - District Level) (Total, SC/ST)', Census of India, 2011, C-2 (Appendix) Marital Status by Single Year Age and Sex (India & States/UTs - District Level) (Total, SC/ST), Census of India, 2011, C-3 Marital Status By Religious Community And Sex (India & States/UTs-District Level)

### Data and Discussion

In the history of census of India, information on 'Marital Status' was collected for the first time in 1881. From 1881 to 1931 censuses, the population was classified into married, unmarried, widowed or widower and no information was collected regarding 'divorce'. Divorced persons were entered as widowers from 1901 to 1931. It was only in 1941 census that the divorced persons were recorded separately. In 1951 Census, the marital status of the persons was recorded as unmarried, married, widowed and divorced.

No change in the definition of marital status was made in 1961 census except that the term 'unmarried' was replaced by 'never married' and 'Separated' was added with 'Divorced'. The marital status of the prostitutes was recorded as declared by them. In 1971 Census the marital status of a person was recorded under the following heads: Never married, Married, Widowed, Separated or Divorced. For the present study data on marital status from census 2011 was used.

Considering the scope of the study data about female widows was curated from 3 tables- 1) Age group wise distribution of widows in urban and rural parts of the country. 2) Religion wise distribution of widows. 3) Age group wise widows who head their families. For the sake of better presentation and understanding, the absolute numbers from the census data are converted in percentage with respect to total female population in the country.

### Percentage of age group wise distribution of widows in urban and rural parts of India

Age- sex structure is one of the most important characteristics of population composition. Almost all population characteristics vary significantly with age. Age statistics form an important component of population analysis, as most of the analysis is based on age-sex structure of the population. The usefulness of age data is more noticeable when it is cross classified by variables like marital status, literacy educational attainment, economic activity which vary with age in different patterns. Hence analyzing the age wise distribution of widows in the population is considered to be an important and insightful way of understanding the scenario of widowhood. It also helped in knowing the incidences of child marriage and child widows.

India has one of the largest proportions of population of widows in the world. It is estimated to be more than 44 million. Approximately 10 % of total female population in the country are widows. The following table shows the

age wise distribution of widows in urban and rural parts of the country. Here the percentages have been drawn with respect to total widowed population on females.

The percentage of widowed women in the age group of 40 years to 54 years is slightly higher in urban areas than in rural areas. Where as in the age group 50-69 years this percentage is considerably higher in urban areas than in rural area. In the age group 75-79 years the percentage of widows in rural areas is 60.88% where as in rural area it is 64.62%.

**Table I: Percentage of age group wise distribution of widows in urban and rural parts of India**

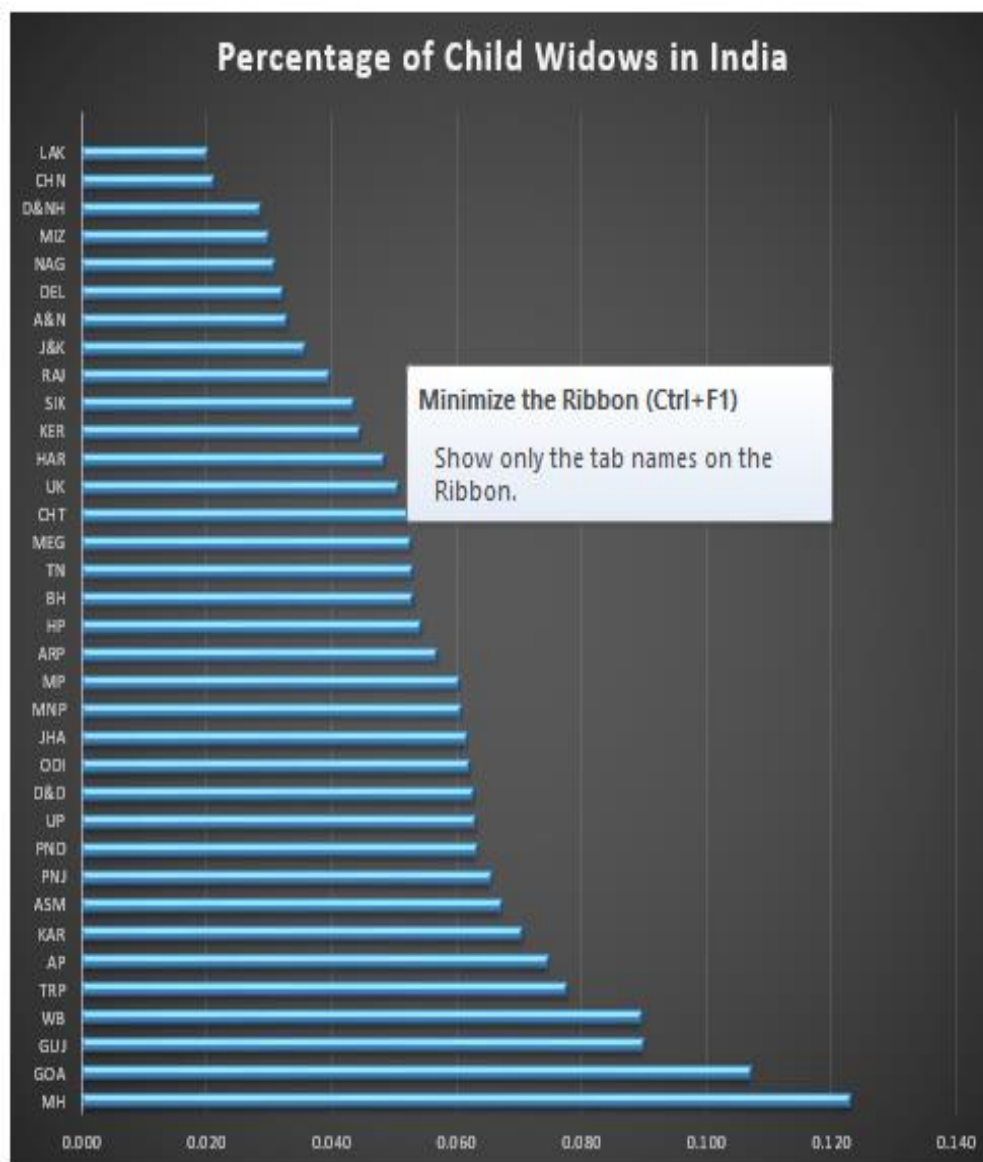
Age Group	% of widows in rural	% of widows in urban
All ages	7.27	7.57
0-9	0.00	0.00
10-14	0.09	0.12
15-19	0.23	0.22
20-24	0.61	0.51
25-29	1.37	1.12
30-34	2.60	2.29
35-39	4.43	4.22
40-44	7.38	7.33
45-49	10.63	11.22
50-54	16.94	17.41
55-59	19.32	22.34
60-64	34.14	35.88
65-69	42.45	44.53
70-74	60.52	59.46
75-79	60.88	64.62
80+	69.36	68.25
Age not stated	6.79	6.77
Less than 18	0.06	0.08
Less than 21	0.10	0.12

Source: Census of India, 2011

### Percent of child widows in India

Child widows are those young girls who have endured both child marriage and widowhood before the age of eighteen. They have undergone multiple violations of their human rights from very young age. Being widow at the tender age, they lack ingress to justice and are manipulated by various persons. Rights are provided by our government for safeguarding them. In the following table the percentage of child widows is calculated with respect to total number of widows in respective state. In spite of having strict laws with respect to minimum age

at marriage the percentage of child widows in India considerably high. Maharashtra shows highest number of child widows. Followed by Goa, Gujarat and West Bengal.



### Religion wise distribution of widows

Highest number of Hindu widows is found in Himachal Pradesh and Dadranagar Haweli. This is followed by Diudaman, Puduchery and Andhra Pradesh. The least number of Hindu widows was seen in North East India. this is because of high density of tribal population in North east India. Highest number of Muslim widows is seen in Lakshadweep. Around 60% of widows in Jammu and Kashmir belong to Muslim religion. Highest number of Christian widows was seen in Nagaland. The number of Jain widows is considerably less in India. the able below shows comprehensive data about the percentage of widows in 6 religions in India, namely Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh and Buddhist.

Table 2: Religion wise percentage of distribution of widows in all the states of India

State	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	Sikh	Buddhist	Jain	Other
ASSAM	64.03	32.06	3.48	0.03	0.18	0.01	0.09
CHANDIGARH	74.88	2.67	1.11	20.95	0.08	0.24	0.02
HIMACHAL PRADESH	96.93	1.21	0.09	0.80	0.89	0.01	0.01
India	84.80	9.21	2.17	1.76	0.72	0.15	1.02
JAMMU & KASHMIR	37.56	59.40	0.16	1.68	1.05	0.00	0.01
JHARKHAND	65.25	8.70	5.97	0.02	0.02	0.02	19.79
MANIPUR	39.30	8.49	43.73	0.02	0.18	0.02	8.10
MEGHALAYA	12.48	5.51	70.48	0.01	0.21	0.01	11.05
MIZORAM	0.67	0.57	88.02	0.00	12.81	0.01	0.07
NAGALAND	2.93	0.92	95.47	0.00	0.24	0.02	0.34
PUNJAB	24.65	1.18	1.07	72.73	0.14	0.03	0.04
SIKKIM	52.30	0.21	10.60	0.06	33.06	0.02	3.51
ANDAMAN & NICOBAR	66.37	5.40	27.44	0.28	0.09	0.00	0.28
ANDHRA PRADESH	94.24	4.44	0.98	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.01
ARUNACHAL PRADESH	18.56	0.55	34.35	0.03	14.64	0.06	31.56
BIHAR	83.94	15.68	0.14	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.02
CHHATTISGARH	94.73	0.64	1.73	0.02	0.17	0.03	2.59
DADRA & NAGAR HAVELI	96.79	1.70	1.32	0.00	0.04	0.02	0.06
DAMAN & DIU	96.20	3.58	0.21	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
GOA	67.03	1.83	30.84	0.03	0.08	0.02	0.01
GUJARAT	93.80	5.35	0.46	0.02	0.02	0.25	0.02
HARYANA	89.29	4.31	0.09	6.16	0.02	0.03	0.01
KARNATAKA	92.34	5.80	0.88	0.01	0.16	0.63	0.01
KERALA	62.19	18.38	19.17	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.01
LAKSHADWEEP	0.00	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
MADHYA PRADESH	94.78	2.71	0.17	0.10	0.44	0.24	1.45
MAHARASHTRA	88.12	4.51	0.21	0.04	6.20	0.52	0.16
NCT OF DELHI	93.81	4.63	0.34	1.02	0.03	0.11	0.00
ODISHA	94.38	1.11	2.56	0.02	0.03	0.01	1.72
PUDUCHERRY	94.52	2.85	2.51	0.04	0.00	0.00	0.02
RAJASTHAN	93.54	4.37	0.08	1.43	0.01	0.48	0.01
TAMIL NADU	93.58	2.31	3.89	0.01	0.01	0.04	0.01
UTTAR PRADESH	86.56	12.61	0.14	0.35	0.11	0.02	0.01
UTTARAKHAND	92.67	4.90	0.20	2.02	0.12	0.01	0.00
WEST BENGAL	73.81	22.86	0.83	0.02	0.27	0.02	2.03
TRIPURA	84.43	8.63	3.60	0.01	3.18	0.02	0.04

Source: Census of India, 2011

### Conclusion

Widowhood may be defined simply as the transition from one marital status to another. But due to the severe complexity of its consequences in our social setup it draws the attention of sociologists and demographers. The consequences of widowhood to a woman are more hazardous than to a man since the society imposes a lot of restrictions on women. The widow has to undergo deprivation in social, psychological, cultural and economic terms. Women marry relatively early in our country and high caste Hindu widows in India are socially prohibited from remarrying (Agarwala, 1962). While remarriages for widowed women are not frequent, the same is not true with respect to widowers. Widowhood has been a serious problem which has socio-economic and demographic consequences.

Present study is an attempt to explain the extent and spread of widows in different parts of India with respect to their age, religion and household headship. It is rather unfortunate that though the cause of widows in our society

has attracted the attention of many social reformers, society's attitude towards widows has not appreciably changed in past decades. In this context, it is very important that social workers, voluntary agencies and the Government make a concerted effort to improve the lot of widows. There is need to create a more favorable atmosphere for widow remarriages with the help of welfare organizations. The Government should also provide some kind of priority or reservation in jobs for widows and, at the same time, ensure self-employment by providing proper training and financial assistance. The existing programs of Adult Education and various other government and semi-government schemes could incorporate the required measures towards the benefit of widows.

**References**

1. Census of India, 2011, C-2 Marital Status By Age And Sex (India & States/UTs - District Level) (Total, SC/ST)
2. Census of India, 2011, C-2 (Appendix) Marital Status by Single Year Age and Sex (India & States/UTs - District Level) (Total, SC/ST)
3. Census of India, 2011, C-3 Marital Status By Religious Community And Sex (India & States/UTs-District Level)
4. Sonawat, R. (2001), Understanding families in India: A reflection of societal change. *Psicologia: Teoria e pesquisa*, vol 17, 177-186.
5. Das, Shubhamoy, "Vedic Women" Learn Religion, August 20,2020, 'Esteem of Women in Vedic India'
6. Women and Hinduism, Dec 7, 2017, [www.hinduamerican.org/hinduism-101-women-and-hinduism](http://www.hinduamerican.org/hinduism-101-women-and-hinduism)
7. Agarwala, S.N. 1962, 1962, 1965, 1968, 1985 Census of India 1961, 1971, 1981 Dandekar, K., 1962 Dyson, T., 1987 Hajnal, J., 1953 Roy, T.K. & Lahiri, S., 1987 Sinha, R.K., 1990 Trends and Correlates of Widowhood in India 103 REFERENCES "Widow Remarriage in India", *Medical Digest*, Vol. 30(10), 549-58. Age at Marriage in India, Allahabad: Kitab Mahal. Age at Widowhood in India, Delhi: Institute of Economic Growth "Widowhood Age and Length of Fertile Union", *Worldviews of Population Problems*, Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Sciences India's Population Problems, (Revised by A.P. Sinha), Bombay: Tat

**Cite This Article:**

**Dr. Sanhita Athawale & Savani Karade, (2022). Extent of Widowhood in India: A Review of Census 2011, *Electronic International Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, XI (III) May-June, 105-111.**