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## Once Widowed in India, Twice Scorned

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VRINDAVAN, India, March 25 (Copyright 1998 The New York Times Company)

Govind Dasi has only a vague sense of the passing years, but this much she knows: She was married at 12 in her native village outside Calcutta, widowed at 14 when her teenage husband died of tuberculosis, then forced to work as an unpaid servant for her mother-in-law for about 30 years.

About 15 years ago, penniless and despairing, she boarded a train for the 1,000-mile journey west to Vrindavan, the holy city that has been a point of convergence for Indian widows for at least 500 years.

If Govind does not remember exactly how long she has been here, it is partly because she is illiterate, and partly because of the seamlessness of time.

Like the other widows who migrate to this city in central India, she makes her way before dawn each day to one of 4,000 Hindu temples, where she joins in chants to the deity Krishna. Her surname, Dasi, "servant" in Hindi, is adopted by all the widows here to show their religious devotion.

Along with poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition, many Indians regard the plight of the 33 million Hindu widows as one of the darkest blots on the nation's conscience -- one that 200 years of social activism and legislation has only partly erased. To be a Hindu widow in the 1990's, at least a poor one, according to Uma Chakravarty, a sociologist at Delhi University, is still to suffer "social death."

The core of the problem lies in what Indian sociologists call patri-local residence -- the custom of Hindu brides' marrying into their husbands' families, largely severing ties with their own.

In many cases, especially when widowhood comes early, this leaves a woman dependent on in-laws whose main interest after her husband's death is to rid the family of the burden of supporting her.

But like many of Vrindavan's widows, Govind has little inclination to bewail her fate.

"Whatever happens to us happens; it is our karma," she said, referring to the Hindu belief that life's fortunes are dictated by good or evil deeds in former lives.

"In any case, if we say we are suffering, who is going to bother? We will still be alone, and we will still be left with only one solution, to pray to God. It is our life, and we must live it, and hope for better in the next."

When they are not chanting in the temples, most of the 5,000 widows here spend that life alone, without family, often without proper shelter, and with no savings beyond the few rupees they tuck into their saris.

Many came here voluntarily to escape the miseries of life as outcasts in their native villages, as Govind did. Others were brought by their families on the pretext of making pilgrimages, then abandoned.

For most, survival is assured by meager handouts of rice and lentils at the temples, coupled with a stipend of two rupees -- about five cents -- if they chant for four hours in the evening, on top of the four morning hours of holy choruses.

Some live beneath stairwells, on verandas or in makeshift shelters, using old jute matting or discarded clothing for bedcovers.

But even those with a bit of money fear eviction. Slum landlords are eager to join a housing boom that has been driven partly by the young Westerners who come in the thousands as Krishna devotees.

For the younger widows -- some barely teen-agers despite laws that forbid child marriages -- there is the additional threat of being forced into sex with landlords, rickshaw drivers, policemen, even Hindu holy men.

This, too, has historically been part of the widows' lot. The tradition of their being forced to have sex with other men in their husbands' families, or to sell sex, was once so widespread that the Hindi word "randi," or widow, became a synonym for prostitute.

Govind's life is better than many. Along with her chanting, she works as a seamstress in a garment factory, earning 500 rupees a month to supplement the 125 rupees she gets as a widow's pension.

This is enough to pay for a room on the edge of the city, and a few small comforts, like a spare sari in the white muslin that is the traditional widow's garb, and a pair of sandals, as she would otherwise go barefoot. Still, she worries about what will happen when she grows too old to work or walk to the temples.

"Life is not happy, but it is not so unhappy either," she said as she sat on the floor of a local schoolhouse, where she gathered with a dozen other widows who visit to get help from the principal, Kamala Ghosh.

Govind went on, "But when I think of the future, then I get worried." Voice breaking, eyes brimming, she paused. Then, composed again, she resumed. "It's all karma anyway, so what's the use of thinking?"

Mrs. Ghosh, 51, is in a long line of Hindu activists going back to Ram Mohan Roy, an early 19th-century reformer. One of Mr. Roy's goals was the banning of the custom of suttee, the immolation of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres. Suttee was outlawed by a British colonial governor, Lord William Bentinck, in 1829.

Despite the ban, the practice has survived, with occasional reports of widows dousing themselves with fuel and setting themselves alight, either voluntarily or under duress. Murders of widows are much more common.

The cause of both is most often conflict over property, particularly land. Widows are pitted against their husbands' families, or sometimes their own sons and daughters. Much of the misery inflicted on them through the centuries is rooted in this issue.

Mrs. Ghosh has won the widows' loyalty by battling for them: with landlords over rent-gouging or eviction orders; with bureaucrats who delay or deny pensions until thick files of paperwork have accumulated or sufficient bribes have been paid, and -- most difficult of all -- with those said to have sexually harassed them.

Although Indian studies have shown that widows' sexual vulnerability is an entrenched fact of life, most widows are reluctant to acknowledge the problem for fear of being barred from the temples or otherwise ostracized.

"No! No! We are married to Lord Krishna," the women at Mrs. Ghosh's schoolhouse said in chorus, after an exchange of glances, when asked about unwanted sex.

Vrindavan's appeal to widows over the centuries has rested on the belief that Krishna, the most human incarnation of the universal Hindu God Vishnu, played along the banks of the Jumna River here as a boy and teased young girls as they bathed in it.

Krishna's appeal to the widows is said to lie partly in his boyhood waywardness, and partly, in his adult incarnation, as the ideal lover.

As with the battle to uproot some of the most regressive aspects of the ancient Hindu social hierarchy known as caste, those who fight for widows' rights must reckon with ancient scriptures.

According to the Skanda Purana, an early Hindu text, widows are to be avoided.

"The widow is more inauspicious than all other inauspicious things," it says. "At the sight of a widow, no success can be had in any undertaking; excepting one's mother, all widows are void of auspiciousness. A wise man should avoid even her blessings like the poison of a snake."

Attitudes evolve at a glacial pace, especially in the 650,000 villages where nearly three-quarters of all Indians live.

The banning of suttee was followed in the late 1800's by another British law removing the Hindu ban on remarriage. But the taboo on second marriages has remained strong.

Another widow at the Vrindavan schoolhouse, Urmila Dasi, 35, who was married at 11 in her village in Bangladesh and widowed at 14, said she had longed for a second husband and children, but abandoned the idea.

"I dreamed of it," she said, "but I was told that society would not permit it, that if I did it anyway, I would be an outcast. But I was only a child then. Later I came to understand that if I remarried, the honor of my family would be lost, that it is our Hindu custom to have only one husband and that if he died, it was only because I had bad karma. And if I had bad karma, what was the point of remarrying?"

Since independence, Indian governments have revised inheritance laws to entrench widows' rights to a share of their husbands' property, and legislated for pensions. But more often than not, laws are circumvented.

One study found that inheritance laws often served to entrap women. Their husbands' families, intent on preventing division of land and homes, frequently forced them to remarry back into the family.

The old customs mean that many Hindu girls are twice blighted. Parents eager to unburden themselves of a daughter arrange a childhood marriage, and widowhood leaves the woman unwanted again.

Govind still weeps when she recalls the miseries after her husband died in the early 1950's.

"It was terrible working all those years as my mother-in-law's servant," she said. "But here things are much better. All around, there are cries of 'Krishna! Krishna!' and that makes me feel as though I belong."

Illustrations: Photo: Indian widows in Vrindavan, all surnamed Dasi, or servant, survive on handouts. (John F. Burns/The New York Times)(pg. 1)

Map of India showing the location of Vrindavan: Indian widows flock to Vrindavan, devoting their lives to prayer. (pg. 12)  
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