

cityofwidows

As you reach the outskirts of the holy city of Vrindavan in northern India, childhood home of the Hindu god Krishna, property developers' billboards hog the skyline with slogans aimed at yuppie weekenders and rich retirees: 'The Modern Style of Spiritual Living', 'Discover God, Discover Yourself', 'Welcome to the Beautiful World'.

But this dream lifestyle, where spirituality and luxury dovetail, couldn't be further from the experience of the 16,000 destitute widows living on Vrindavan's dusty streets and at its 'ashrams' (religious shelters). Stigmatised by society for bringing bad luck, forbidden to remarry and often cast out by their families, the only thing they have to look forward to is death. And so they flock, some travelling hundreds of miles, to the sanctuary of Vrindavan, known as the City of Widows, to live out their days surviving on donations from the local temples and worshipping Krishna in order to attain moksha: the release from the cycle of rebirth.

The myths and prejudices surrounding these widows is the subject of Deepa Mehta's film *Water*, which this year was nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. Set in 1938, the film – the last in the Indian-born Canadian director's controversial trilogy, *Fire*, *Earth* and now *Water* – opens with an eight-year-old child bride having her head shaved and being made to wear white upon the death of an elderly husband she has never met. Thus begins her widowhood – and ends her childhood and life.

The film's romanticised styling and period setting would suggest that such practices have moved on or are rarefied. Indeed, India's reputation is more one where elderly parents are venerated and looked after in old age. It is all the more shocking then to discover that this inhumane treatment of widows is not only still in existence, but on the rise. India is paying the price for its economic boom and new prosperity at the cost of crumbling traditional values and growing disregard for its elderly citizens.

Leading activist Dr Mohini Giri, for 16 years a widow herself, who runs an ashram in Vrindavan for 120 outcast widows, explains: 'Widows are considered inauspicious, but in some states the stigma is worse. The Bengalis believe it's a sin to become a widow. West Bengal is also the only state in India where property is inherited by the woman. So the sons are envious and they say, "Mum, sign over your money and property to me, and I will take you for a darshan" – a pilgrimage to Lord Krishna – and they bring them here and abandon them.'

'But it's also happening in Delhi. It's economic compulsion. Neither their parents-in-law nor their children want them. As a daughter-in-law they were the most powerful person, but without a man, ➤

'THE MINUTE YOUR HUSBAND IS TAKEN AWAY, YOU BECOME A ZERO'

When a Hindu woman is widowed, she faces rejection by society and is often cast out by her family. Thousands seek sanctuary in the holy city of Vrindavan, where they live in poverty waiting for death. Now an Oscar-nominated controversial film, banned in India, exposes their plight

Report and photographs Sue Carpenter



Opposite: widow Sushila Das sits in prayer at Dr Giri's ashram. Above: the child widow in Deepa Mehta's film *Water*

ALLSTAR