

◀ women have no social status. The minute your husband is taken away from you, you become a zero.'

In the past, Hindu widows literally became a zero when they committed suttee, leaping on their husband's funeral pyre. Since that brutal practice was outlawed in 1829 (although it carried on until much later), many women have been left to endure a living death. A widow must shave her head, wear only white and refrain from wearing jewellery, make-up and a red bindi – anything that might be considered attractive to the opposite sex. She must not eat meat, lest it arouse sexual desire, and with her newfound status as a cursed being, it is extremely unlucky for her to attend weddings and other celebrations. Remarriage is a sin – a widow must live in purity to die in purity.

Walking through the archway into Dr Giri's ashram, Aamar Bari, is like walking on to the set of *Water*, which is set in another holy city, Varanasi, where an equally large number of widows live in similar destitution. Here is the same array of bent old women, some in white saris, the same sucked-in cheeks, the same slash of yellow sandalwood paste down their foreheads where a bindi might have been. Despite the edict here that heads should not be shorn and colours may be worn, many widows, steeped in their cultural tradition, adhere to the most austere practices.

Gargi, in a pink sari, is a notable exception. She is only 36 years old. Like most of the other widows here, she is from West Bengal. Her husband died in an autorickshaw accident seven years ago, leaving her with a baby girl. When women marry they become the property of their husband's family and move into their domain. If the husband should die however, the daughter-in-law becomes a burden.

'My mother-in-law threw me out but kept my baby,' says Gargi. 'She said, "It's my boy's child and you get out." I wasn't happy but I couldn't do anything. I went to live with my mother for two years, but when she died I came to Vrindavan.'

Among the articles I am shown by the Guild of Service, Dr Giri's Delhi-based organisation that runs Aamar Bari, is one referring to Gargi. 'This vivacious girl dresses up to the hilt, with lipstick and make-up. She imagines that she is different from the other widows... She sure does feel superior because that is the only way she can forget the pain she has suffered.'

Perhaps this is the way Gargi once was. When I point my camera at her, she is immediately conscious of her appearance and rearranges her greased hair and moistens her cracked lips. But there is no vivacity, no visible pride. Like many of the women here, she either sits solitarily in her sordid, windowless cell room, or wanders from one courtyard to another, passing the odd word with other inmates.

I try to understand how she must have felt having her baby grasped from her and any hope of a normal life destroyed. She looks confused. In a culture where women are living out the diktats of 2,000-year-old



**LEFT: widows and abandoned women queue up for food behind a barred window at the Balaji ashram. Although some widows, ingrained with tradition, shave their heads, dress in white and don't wear bindis, some choose not to – perhaps emboldened by being with other women in the same situation. ABOVE: Dr Mohini Giri – whose mission is to change the lives of rejected widows – greets the residents of Aamar Bari, home to 120 women. BELOW: a group of widows sort through spinach leaves in the main courtyard at Aamar Bari**



## 'Neither the widow's parents-in-law nor their children want them. Without a man, women have no social status'

sacred texts, there is no room for individual feelings.

In a quiet, shady spot, Sushila Das, 82, unrumpled her frail body on the flagstones. She was a child of five and her husband eight years old when they married in West Bengal. 'I was barely nine when he died,' she recalls. Sushila was one of the few fortunate widows whose father-in-law had a deep affection for her. He continued to look after her like his own. Yet there was no question of her merging into society as a normal young girl. She remained single and, after her father-in-law died 15 years ago, came to Vrindavan to spend her days praying for an end to her existence.

In the main courtyard, a group of women sit on

their haunches, sorting spinach leaves. Sunayna, 60, rolls cones of incense on the floor, one of the skills taught at the ashram to bring these women a small income – 12 cones sell for five rupees [0.06p].

The atmosphere within these walls is not exactly threatening, but some of the women's lurking presence and the dismal pall of inevitability become claustrophobic. *Water* captures the sense that some of these women, shunned by society as cursed, do in some way take on a witch-like mantle.

It is a relief to go out into the maze of streets, thronging with rickshaws and ox carts, and lined with stalls selling Krishna effigies and memorabilia. A blind widow with a stick tries to cross the busy lane and gets tangled up in a bicycle rickshaw. She beats the rickshaw wallah about the head and shoulders, as the crowd looks on in amusement. Muttering, she disappears down an alley.

At Rangji Temple, widows and Krishna devotees swathed in salmon pink line up with their begging bowls. Most of the widows live on the alms of ashrams next to the temples, where, each morning and afternoon, in exchange for two or three hours of clashing cymbals and chanting, 'Hare Krishna, Hare