



**Today, there are 42 million widows in India. Not only does men's attitude need radical reform, so does that of the women**

**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Gargi, in a nonconformist pink sari, whose mother-in-law threw her out and kept her baby; widows hang out washing at Aamar Bari; Sushila Das, who married at the age of five, has been single since her husband died when she was nine. Now 82, she spends her days in worship dressed in a traditional white sari. Sandalwood paste on her face replaces a bindi; a crowd of widows welcome Dr Giri, fondly chanting 'Radhe, Radhe' – an affectionate name for Krishna's consort Radha**



Ram,' they earn themselves a gram of uncooked dal (lentils), two grams of rice and three rupees.

Further out of town, towards the gleaming white marble Iskcon temple (that of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, funded and largely populated by Western Krishna devotees) at the Balaji ashram, women queue up behind a barred window, waiting for a place in the line for food. Next to the woman doling out dal are a girl and her father, handing out woollen shawls.

'My family comes twice a year from Jaipur,' the man tells me. 'We have brought 700 shawls for these women who have been widowed or abandoned by their husbands. As a Krishna devotee, it is my duty.'

Today, there are 42 million widows in India. Dr Giri has commissioned a survey to ascertain how many are outcast and what can be done to stop the tide. In 1969, the Hindu Succession Act was passed, making women eligible to inherit equally with men, but tradition overrides it. Few women rebel – they have neither the education, the financial self-sufficiency nor the confidence to make a stand. Dr Giri, 68, widowed at the age of 52, was in a different position. The educated

daughter-in-law of a former president of India, she founded the War Widows Association after the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war, and has made it her mission to change the fate of widows.

Recognising the limitations of Aamar Bari, she has bought land outside Vrindavan and is building a new ashram, Ma Dham, to house 500 widows and 500 orphans, creating grandmother-granddaughter relationships that will bring meaningful connection to the lives of both. The project, also providing healthcare and vocational training, will be self-sustaining with 500 cows, producing milk, cheese, ice cream and sweets for sale.

Dr Giri has also been involved in the making of a feature film, *White Rainbow*, set in Vrindavan. Like *Water*, it has yet to find a distributor in the UK, and has been blocked from cinemas in India by Hindu fundamentalist groups who reject it as a slur on Hindu society. But, Dr Giri believes, change will only come when pressure mounts from outside India.

Changing a 2,000-year-old habit may be more difficult than turning an oil tanker. Not only does men's attitude need radical reform, so does that of the women. Many of the widows at Aamar Bari are

not just resigned to their fate, but choose to be there, such as Lukhi Rani Shah, 85, from West Bengal, who came to Aamar Bari of her own volition, when her children were grown up, to spend the rest of her life in prayer. And Kanak Lata, 80, from Assam state, who has a son and daughter-in-law willing to take care of her, but who chooses to be here to pray to Krishna, as well as to make lamp wicks.

A gong rings out and women descend from their rooms on the upper floor, pouring out of the archways into the main courtyard, tin trays in hand. A staff member ladles rice, dal and garlicky spinach from tin pails on to the trays. Usha, 68, takes her lunch back up to her quarters, which she shares with another widow, and sets it aside as she continues her prayers before an image of Krishna and his consort Radha. I am struck by her air of serenity.

When she finishes repeating her Krishna mantra, with each bead of her mala necklace tucked in a special bag on her wrist, she looks up at me and smiles. Kneading together her rice and dal, Usha tells me that her husband died nine years ago and her son does not care about her. Then her eyes light up. 'I feel good about this place. I want to get moksha.' ▣