

Destitute

By one estimate, there are more than 20,000 widows living in Vrindavan. With nowhere to go and nobody to turn to, they move there as they believe it is where the Hindu god Krishna lived. Most come from West Bengal. Destitute, they spend their days singing bhajans (Hindu hymns) and begging for food. Shunned by society and their families, many have lost their confidence and the will to live.



Annappurna Sharma (right) refuses to wear white and sports jewellery unlike other widows

But Vinita Verma of Sulabh International, the organisation that has brought these women to this city, says "trips like this are changing that". "As they got off the train at Calcutta's Howrah station, other passengers stopped and touched their feet [a traditional Indian gesture of respect] as the widows reminded them of their grandmothers," she says. For women who are seen by some as bearers of bad luck and kept away from their families, it was an emotional moment, one they never thought they would see and a sign that attitudes to them are changing.

But change is difficult. Many of the women here are reluctant to talk about what happened to them. Few blame their sons for abandoning them. Arati Nath, 65, was born outside Calcutta and was married when she was just 15. She was thrown out of her house five years ago. "My sons were all good to me, but they changed after they got married. It is my daughters-in-law who are the problem. I can never go back and live there," she says.

'So happy'

Some of the older widows said it was their duty to leave as they did not want to be a burden on their families. Others tell me they had to leave as they had no sons. Sitting in a wheelchair is 87-year-old Kanaklata Adhikari.

Her husband died before they had any children and she has returned home after 70 years. The elderly widow was reluctant to come to Calcutta, but she is glad she did. She has had lots of visitors - first, her sister's son came and then the rest of her family and she has met her great grand nephews and nieces too. Her 25-year-old grand-niece Baisakhi Adhikari had tears in her eyes as she hugged her. Sobbing, Baisakhi told me: "I am so happy to see her. If only she had come a few days earlier, she would have been able to see her sister before she died." Baisakhi cannot understand why her great-aunt was sent away. "It could not happen now: I would not allow it," she says and adds, "if we do not look after our elders, then our children will treat us in the same way. I will never send my mother away, even if my husband tells me to." The other widows smile as she says that and one says: "No woman deserves to suffer like we have."



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