



Editor's Column

They come in search of 'Moksha' to Kashi, Mathura and Vrindavan, expecting to find spiritual peace and physical security. But once they reach these pilgrim centres, their dreams are shattered. They find another fate awaiting them.

Most of them after becoming widows, have been persuaded to settle down in these pilgrim centres and were promised regular financial assistance. But before long, the flow of money stops and for their relatives they almost cease to exist, bereft of financial, social or emotional support. Deserted by their husbands' families after their husbands' deaths, they are then left to fend for themselves.

The latest report prepared by the National Commission for Women after it was asked to submit a comprehensive report on the plight of widows in Vrindavan and Mathura by the Supreme Court reveals horrifying tales of how these widows have been subjected to all kinds of abuse. Being denied a fair deal in their State, widows in West Bengal are increasingly shifting to Vrindavan and Mathura, preferring to lead a life of penury, neglect and humiliation rather than being left destitute back home.

Of the 5,000-odd widows surveyed by the Commission, a shocking 74 percent widows belonged to West Bengal. The report said, "it would be fair to say that the status of widowed women in Bengal is among the worst in the country and in the modern times, poverty is another reason for the arrival of more and more women from West Bengal". Of the remaining women interviewed by the Commission, some hailed from Chhatisgarh and Uttar Pradesh as well.

The report said that the majority of women did not have pension and ration cards and survived on earnings from

singing bhajans. They earn a measly wage of Rs. 3 per day for singing bhajans while most among them are engaged in performing daily chores at the temples, ashrams and bhajan homes. There are some, who are less fortunate, and are found begging for alms around street corners, temple porches and markets.

Along with the report, the Commission also gave a set of recommendations. The NCW has asked the Supreme Court to consider directing immediate construction of housing

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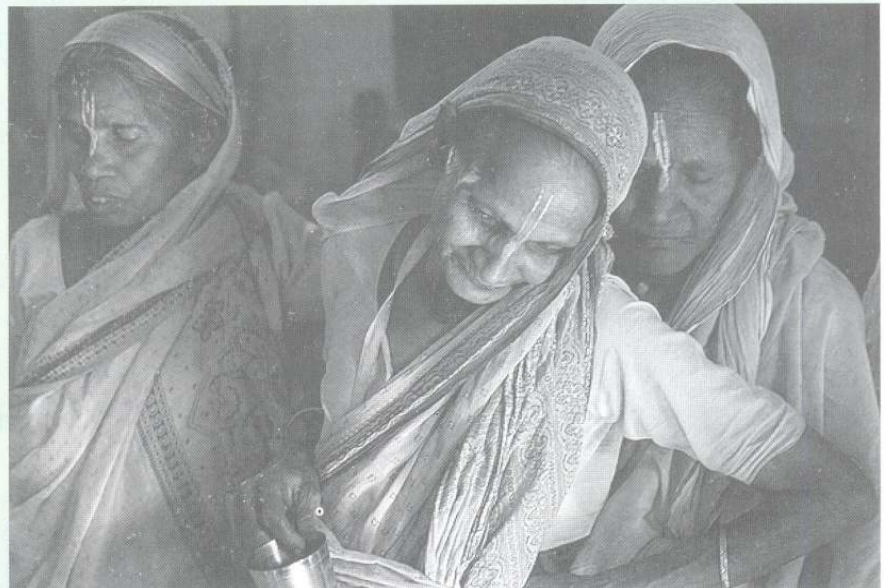
Widows of Pilgrim Centres

facilities for the widows as several women spend nights in shanties, make-shift tents, under the staircase or in the open in appalling conditions. Those women, who are housed in Ashrams and residential quarters are no better off. The overcrowded quarters do not possess toilets, water facilities and provision of electricity. With the majority of the widows being illiterate, this fact is exploited by the temple authorities and priests. They are paid meager wages, though the temple receives

huge donations from the devotees. Hence, the Commission recommended the court to consider asking the state to disburse pension and ration facilities for these women as well as providing water, electricity, medical care. For the many unemployed, or engaged in menial jobs, the Commission sought the cooperation of NGOs to help the widows to secure suitable employment.

But the need of the hour for these hapless widows is not just rehabilitation in some institutions but to give them a sense of belonging through community-based services and extended family pattern of care and being involved in some income generating activities.

However, compared to the needs of growing ageing population, the government and NGOs cannot do much unless there is societal awareness of the problems faced by the aged through community involvement. The leaders of the community and the captains of the industry must extend a helping hand and collaborate with the government and NGOs in their efforts to provide the elderly dignity and security in old age.



NCW's Meeting with UNIFEM

A meeting was held at the National Commission for Women to discuss the way forward to implement the Government of India's efforts to stop trafficking in women and girls through community action by UNIFEM in partnership with NCW.

Ms. Anne Stenhammer, the Regional Programme Director, UNIFEM informed that the European Commission had accepted the concept and there was a need to initiate some exercise on it to take the plan forward as per the MOU with NCW. This would include mapping of source areas by way of studies and brainstorming and spreading awareness through seminars. She appreciated the role of NCW in partnering with UNIFEM on the issue of human trafficking.

Ms. Madhubala Nath, Regional Technical Advisor, UNIFEM, thereafter elaborated on the concept note and informed that the project was proposed to be taken up in 6 States to mobilize community action for stopping trafficking. In the 6 sustainable community owned States, one district level centre would be set up in each State, which would serve as a result-oriented learning centre for skill development of survivors of trafficking and vulnerable women and girls.

Dr. Girija Vyas, agreed to the views submitted by UNIFEM and desired that the documentation exercise could be completed latest



Ms. Anne Stenhammer, Ms. Madhubala Nath and Dr. Girija Vyas in discussion.

by end of July so that action could start at the earliest.

After deliberation, the following points were unanimously agreed upon :

1. A donor coordination meeting could be held by the NCW and UNIFEM wherein the donors could be informed of the detailed action plan and the collaborative proposals. NCW would also try to mobilize possible donors like the Aga Khan Foundation.
2. A suitable date for the seminar could be the second week of September as mapping of source areas could take some time and the documentation has to be shared with the donors for study before discussions.
3. The budget heads for funding have not been frozen as yet and can be discussed.
4. A working group could be set up to periodically monitor the progress made.

Profile in Courage

Upon hearing gunshots in the wee hours of early morning, Poonam and Suman, both in their early teens hailing from a Rohtak Village, rushed outside from their room, only to find their grandfather lying dead in a pool of blood and their uncle injured. The uncle was apparently a witness in an attempt to murder case.

Not caring for the danger that might befall them, they chased the two assailants. Though one managed to escape, the other was dragged from their bike and killed.

The Haryana police have decided to give bravery awards to the two girls. Their act of courage has instilled lot of confidence among the villagers.

From the Complaint Cell

- A woman complainant from Delhi, approached the National Commission for Women alleging that she was subjected to physical/mental torture/cruelty and threat for dowry by her husband and in-laws. She was told that unless she brought handsome dowry, her husband would terminate all relations with her, and marry another girl. She appealed to the Commission to get back her 'stridhan' as well as punish the culprits and ensure her security.

The Commission called both the parties for a personal hearing. A notice was also issued to SSP, Haridwar to ensure the presence of the opposite party for hearing. After 4 hearings in the Commission, both the parties reached an amicable settlement, wherein the groom's side returned the 'stridhan' and Rs. 2 lakh as compensation to the complainant. Further, both the parties agreed to withdraw all cases pending before the authorities.

- A resident of Uttar Pradesh approached the Commission alleging that her daughter was subjected to dowry demand/harassment/mental & physical torture/cruelty by her husband and in-laws. She also alleged that the other party was not allowing her family to meet her daughter and the police was not taking any action in the matter. She appealed to the Commission to let her meet her daughter.

The Commission sent a notice to SP Bijnor, U.P., to come to the Commission along with a detailed Action Taken Report, for the hearing. Thereafter, with the Commission's intervention, an FIR was launched by the police against the husband and the in-laws.

- A complainant alleged that her daughter was killed by her in-laws for not fulfilling demands of dowry. The police arrested the husband, the mother-in-law, the father-in-law but did not arrest the brother-in-law.

The complainant said that although an FIR has been registered and three of the accused persons i.e. the husband, father-in-law and the mother-

in-law have been arrested but the brother-in-law was not arrested as his name was dropped from the FIR.

The matter was taken up by the Commission and the concerned police officers were called for a hearing at the Commission. With the intervention of the Commission, the brother-in-law was also arrested.

Making a difference

Here is one more success story from a remote village of Shahjahanpur in which a woman applying the RTI Act, got a Government solar panel installed in a dalit basti, which otherwise had been already grabbed by a *gram pradhan*.

Savita, a BPL card holder Dalit woman, in March last year had moved an application under RTI Act in the office of Chief Development Officer (CDO) seeking information about total allocation funds for her gram panchayat and heads under which this money was utilised. Another question in the application sought names of the persons in the gram panchayat, at whose doorsteps the Government solar panels were installed and whether they were in running condition or not.

The application was referred to *Zila Panchayatraj Adhikari (ZPA)* who preferred not to answer the queries of the Dalit woman.

Thereafter, Savita filed a petition in the State Information Commission (SIC). After the first hearing in the Commission, ZPA made xerox copies of panchayat accounts available to Savita but remained silent over installation of Government solar panels in the village.

After the SIC warned of financial penalty, ZPA revealed that the solar panel had been installed at the doorstep of *gram pradhan* and was out of order for long. Before the SIC issued any order in the case, ZPA, Shahjahanpur in a letter to the Commission and to Savita, intimated that solar panel after being pulled out from doorstep of the *gram pradhan* had been installed in the Dalit basti of the same gram panchayat.

Important Decisions

● **HC settles HUF property rights dispute for good**

The Delhi High Court has ruled that a woman and her children have the right to seek prohibition against alienation or disposal of properties belonging to a Hindu undivided family (HUF) even when their estranged husband/father and in-laws/grand-parents are alive.

“The children by birth acquire an independent right of ownership in coparcenary (joint inheritance) property and as a consequence of such an ownership, the possession and enjoyment of the property is common”, the court said, setting at rest a prolonged controversy over the rights of a Hindu wife and her children over an ancestral HUF estate.

● **Illegitimate children cannot inherit ancestral property**

The Supreme Court has ruled that children born out of a live-in relationship cannot inherit ancestral property, but only the self-acquired property of their parents.

A child born of void or voidable marriage is not entitled to claim inheritance in ancestral property but is entitled only to claim share in self-acquired properties, if any, the apex court said in an order.

● **Mother can get money from adopted son under DV Act**

In a new dimension to the Domestic Violence Act, a Delhi court has awarded maintenance to a 70-year-old destitute woman, who pleaded in the court seeking justice against ill-treatment by her adopted son.

The Additional Session Judge said, “The mother is entitled to maintenance not only from her adopted son but also from her married daughter”.

“Domestic relations are meant to cover sisters, widows, mothers and daughters and single women”, said the judge.

Overriding the trial court order which awarded Rs. 250 as maintenance from her adopted son, the court immediately ordered that a sum of Rs. 2,500 per month be paid by the son to his mother in lieu of keeping a portion

of her house under his possession.

Noting that the woman is a senior citizen, the court ordered the SHO of the area concerned to ensure that she is duly enrolled for the scheme of ensuring protection of senior citizens.

Couple Murder : NCW seeks report

Taking suo motu cognizance, the National Commission for Women has sought a report from Delhi Police on the alleged torture, flogging and electrocution of a girl and her boyfriend at Swaroop Nagar.

The Commission has sought an action taken report from the police. Police have arrested the girl’s uncle, father, mother and two other relatives.

The NCW also demanded police protection for the family of a minor, who was raped in Meerut and said it would ask the Uttar Pradesh government to sponsor the girl’s education.

Dr. Girija Vyas, NCW Chairperson said she has also asked the police to re-investigate the case as the girl’s family had alleged that all the three accused were let off by authorities concerned. The 13-year-old girl was allegedly raped by three men, one of whom was a relative of a UP minister.

The NCW has also asked for a report on the domestic torture incident in which a woman was allegedly forced by her husband to indulge in group sex with family members.

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www.ncw.nic.in