

White Shadows of Vrindavan

The Future Holds Little Hope For The Widows Here

Atul Sethi / TNN

Vrindavan, for many, is the city of Radha and Krishna — a place where every street reverberates with chants of 'Radhe Radhe'. It is also a city in whose many nooks and corners live numerous abandoned widows, eking out a hand-to-mouth existence and existing like white shadows, thus giving the city its other name — the City of Widows.

No one knows since when these widows have been coming to Vrindavan. Most of them are from Bengal, their life stories often following a similar pattern — death of husband, relatives leaving them at Vrindavan, days spent singing prayers at the city's bhajanashrams, begging at temples and then huddling together in the hovels that they call home, to await another day. In fact, such is the routine that their lives have now fallen into, that most widows refuse to go back to their village or homes, even if given a chance. Instead, they prefer to stick to the familiar predictability of their existence. "Aikhun, eta hi amaar bari (Now, this is our home)," says 54-year-old Narayani Devi, who has been living here since the past 30 years.

Many take a philosophical approach. Says 75-year-old Beena Mandal, "I came to Vrindavan 55 years ago, when my husband died after nine months of our marriage. I thought that if Mirabai — a king's daughter — could come here and spend her days singing Krishna's bhajans, why can't I?" It is this simple faith that keeps these widows, referred to as mais, going on, despite the dismal conditions in which they live. The bhajanashrams, where they congregate for their morning and evening bhajans, pay them Rs 18 per day for around 7-8 hours of singing bhajans. These ashrams are also the epicentre of their universe. For the rest of the time, they are on the streets, begging. Many are also coerced into prostitution. For those who become too old to look after themselves, the other mais pool in resources and look after them.

"We derive comfort from each other, which is why there is a close bonding between us," says 63-year-old Sangeeta Das. Probably, that's why this close-knit group is now being targeted by politicians, ahead of the UP assembly elections. As per estimates, there are around 20,000 widows in Vrindavan. According to Mathura-Vrindavan sitting MLA Pradeep Mathur, around 4,500 of these are registered as voters. Before the elections, many political groups solicit them by offering them incentives like blankets, gifts or even cash. "Many political parties look at them as a potential votebank, since a margin of 3,000- 4,000 votes is also considered huge in today's political scenario," says Mathur, who hastens to add that neither he nor his party indulges in such soliciting.

Social activist Mohini Giri, who runs an ashram and a day-care centre for widows, says that this opportunism is to be expected of politicians. "Nobody cares about widows, while they rot in the streets. Politicians only become interested when they see that they can be exploited for their own gain."

However, she adds that the figure of 4,500 registered voters among widows seems exaggerated. "There would not be more than 300-400 widows with voter I-cards," she says. Even these are too naive and are misled by the managers of ashrams, who act as middlemen and take away the donations which come for them.

So, can something be done, considering that the widows are resigned to their fate and that "Radha Rani ja korbe, bhalo korbe" (Whatever Goddess Radha would do for us would be good for us) is their constant refrain? According to Giri, they should be given vocational skills which help them earn a livelihood, instead of having to depend on alms or donations. Also, efforts should be made to address the root cause of the problem — the compulsions that force them to leave their homes. Only then, many feel, would a life of dignity be possible for the white shadows of Vrindavan.

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