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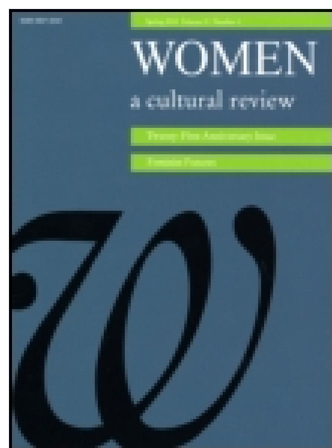

Women: A Cultural Review
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwcr20

Listening to widows in rural India

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Published online: 19 Jun 2008.

To cite this article: Martha Alter Chen (1997) Listening to widows in rural India, Women: A Cultural Review, 8:3, 311-318, DOI: 10.1080/09574049708578320

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09574049708578320

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W MARTHA ALTER CHEN

Listening to Widows in Rural India

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There are about 33 million widows in India, representing 8 per cent of the total female population (Census of India 1991). The proportion of widows in the female population rises sharply with age, reaching over 60 per cent among women aged sixty and above. Despite the concentration of widows in older age groups, there are still a large number of widows below fifty years of age.

In spite of these numbers, relatively little is known about the actual living conditions of widows in India or what widows need and want. This article presents the voices of a cross-section of rural widows from nine states of India: over 550 widows who were interviewed during a recent field study and 25 widows who participated in a recent workshop. The first section contrasts the dominant images of widows with the everyday realities of widowhood. The second presents the expressed needs and demands of widows. A concluding section calls for a transformation of widowhood.[1]

1 The first two sections draw heavily on an earlier paper co-authored with Jean Drèze (Chen and Drèze 1995*b*).

Images and Reality of Widowhood

Although little is actually known about the everyday lives of widows in India, the so-called 'plight' of the Indian widow—or more precisely the Hindu widow—has long captured the attention of Indians and foreigners alike. Three images in particular—the *sati*, the child widow and the ascetic widow—evoke pity, awe and horror.

Clearly, the image of the *sati*, the widow who is immolated on her husband's funeral pyre, is the most affective. Although the symbolic power of *sati* has always far exceeded the actual practice, *sati* has been and promises to

remain one of the most controversial social issues in India (Oldenberg 1994). However, even though the practice continues today—there are two or three reported cases of *sati* per year—other practices associated with widowhood are of more immediate concern for most widows in India.

Another image, that of the child widow, has also long captured public attention, in large part because there is a common belief that the widow, no matter how young, cannot remarry. In fact, only the upper castes traditionally prohibited remarriage. Most other castes traditionally allowed, or even encouraged, remarriage. Moreover, in recent years, the upper castes have begun to allow child widows to remarry. Although less than 20 per cent of all widows remarry, a far higher percentage of child widows—and childless widows—remarry.

If she does not commit *sati* and does not remarry, it is widely believed that the Hindu widow should lead a chaste, austere, ascetic life. The third dominant image, therefore, is of the ascetic widow whose head is shaven, who dresses in plain clothes, eats a simple diet and is banned from attending ceremonies and rituals. Historically, and now, it has been the upper castes which have imposed the greatest restrictions on their widows. But to lead an ascetic life, a widow (and her children) must be maintained and supported by the Hindu joint family.

The associated ideal is that the Hindu joint family provides the widow with a secure place, at least physically and economically. It is widely acknowledged across India that one function of extended family ties is to look after the wives and children of dead relatives. But the widow (and her children) pose a challenge, and a financial burden, to extended family and kinship groups.

Therefore, another image—that of the dependent elderly widow—has increasing symbolic power within India. If supported, cared for and respected by her family, she signifies the 'good family' marked by proper relations between sons and mothers or, in the absence of sons, between brothers and sisters. On the other hand, if she is left to manage or suffer on her own, the elderly widow represents the 'bad family' marked by a lack of filial responsibility (see Cohen forthcoming). The ability of this image increasingly to capture the public imagination reflects very real anxieties. Both the sheer numbers of widows and the increasing numbers of elderly widows are palpable facts of contemporary Indian life.

But what is the status of elderly widows? One way to understand how the status of widows compares to that of their married sisters is to look at such basic demographic indicators as nutrition, morbidity and mortality rates. However, in India, no researcher has yet analysed nutrition and morbidity data by marital status and only one demographer has recently analysed mortality statistics in this way. Using data from the 1961, 1971 and 1981 censuses, P. N. Mari Bhat estimated mortality rates among widows and

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married women above forty-five years of age. For India as a whole, Bhat found that mortality rates are 85 per cent higher among widows than among married women (Mari Bhat forthcoming).

What about widows who manage on their own? Analysing income and expenditure data at an all-India level, Jean Drèze and P. V. Srinivasan found that households headed by widows have a lower-than-average consumption level and a higher-than-average poverty level compared with other households *if* one adjusts for economies of scale as households headed by widows are typically much smaller (Drèze and Srinivasan forthcoming). Earlier, analysing income and expenditure data from one state of India (Karnataka), Jean Drèze had found that households with a widow have somewhat lower per capita expenditure levels than households without a widow. Drèze also found that some subgroups of households with widows have higher-than-average levels of poverty: notably, households consisting of a widow and her unmarried children, especially when the eldest son is still quite young (Drèze 1990).

In brief, despite their symbolic power, the three dominant images of widows in India do not reflect the everyday reality of most widows in India. Even the more contemporary image reflects the everyday concerns of only one subgroup of widows, elderly dependent widows, to the neglect of young widows and widows who live independently. What, then, are the everyday concerns of widows in rural India, both those who live as dependents and those who manage on their own, both young and old?

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What Widows Want and Need

Although the status of widows varies a great deal across different regions, social groups and age groups, some basic factors account for the disadvantages and insecurity faced by many Indian widows (Drèze 1990; Chen and Drèze 1995*a*). In the discussion that follows, to illustrate these factors, I summarize the major findings of my recent field study of widows in seven states of India: West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala. This study covered all ever-widowed women (a total of 562) in fourteen villages, two in each state (Chen forthcoming).

Patrilocality: Patrilocality in the narrow sense refers to the norm, prevalent in most Hindu communities of India, according to which a woman has to leave her parental home at the time of marriage to join her husband in his home. In a broader sense, especially in North India where marriage rules dictate marriage outside the village, patrilocality can also be understood to refer to the drastic alienation from her parental family experienced by a married woman after her 'transfer' to her husband's family. The system of patrilocal residence also plays a crucial part in the deprivation of widows. In North India, in particular, widows are expected to

remain in their husband's village, and most of them do so. However, they are unlikely to receive much support from their in-laws. In effect, most North Indian widows are denied both the freedom to leave their husband's village, and the support they need to live there happily (Drèze and Sen 1995:174).

In my sample, 75 per cent of the widows lived in their husband's village at the time of his death. Of these widows, an overwhelming majority (88 per cent) remained in their deceased husband's village after his death. In many cases, widows actually continue to live in their deceased husband's house. However, outside of leviratic unions (which are practised only in certain communities), widows are unlikely to share a common hearth with their husband's relatives.

Patrilineal inheritance: In rural India, even today, most social groups follow customary norms rather than modern statutory law. In regard to property, there is a widespread tradition of joint patrilineal ownership under which widows are entitled to use rights (if they have no adult sons) or maintenance rights (if they have adult sons) over their husband's share of ancestral land.

In my sample, of those widows whose husbands owned land, only half (51 per cent) reported that they exercise use rights over a share of their husband's land. Moreover, many of these widows reported that their use rights are violated in practice. When a widow tries to manage the land on her own, without adult sons, her in-laws often insist on sharecropping or managing her land themselves, or simply attempt to deprive her of her rightful share of the land. In their attempt to gain control of her land, in-laws—or other rival claimants—may go so far as forcing a widow to leave the village or even, in extreme cases, arranging her murder. Once her sons (if any) grow up, a widow may have to forfeit her use rights to her husband's land in exchange for a right to maintenance by one or more of her sons. Even maintenance rights, as noted below, are often uncertain.

Restrictions on employment: Aside from the general restrictions on female employment, relating *inter alia* to the gender division of labour, widows face specific difficulties. For a variety of reasons, widows are often engaged in less secure and less desirable work than married women. For instance, widows are more likely to work as wage workers whereas married women are more likely to work as unpaid family workers or independent self-employed workers. In my sample, in regard to the primary occupation of households with widows, there was a decline in the share of self-employment—both farm and non-farm—after the death of the husband (from 25 per cent to 20 per cent), and, correspondingly, an increased reliance on wage employment (from 32 per cent to 36 per cent). Furthermore, because widows tend to be concentrated in the older age-groups, the proportion of all widows who work is lower than the proportion of all married women who work.

Social neglect: Perhaps the most striking finding of existing studies

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(including my own) is how few widows are maintained by—in the sense of sharing food with—their in-laws, parents or brothers. The other clear and important finding, a corollary to the first, is how many widows depend on themselves or their sons. More precisely, the proportion of widows who live in households headed either by themselves or by one of their sons is well over 80 per cent in most samples. In my sample, the proportion of widows who live in households headed either by themselves or by one of their sons is well over 85 per cent; the proportion of widows who live in a household headed by a brother-in-law or parent-in-law is below 3 per cent; and the proportion of widows who live in a household headed by a brother or father is only 5 per cent. A related finding is that if she lives as a dependent in a household headed by her son, more so in households headed by others, a widow is likely to be subject to neglect unless she is seen to contribute something important to the household: either land, house or other property; or wage earnings, domestic services or a pension.

Social isolation: The well-being of widows is not just a question of economic security, but also one of dignity, self-respect and participation in society. Many widows suffer from different forms of social isolation, psychological abuse or emotional distress arising from the perceived threats to the social order and to ancestral property associated with widows. The social marginalization of widows frequently takes one or more of the following forms: rumours and accusations; restrictive codes of dress, diet and demeanour; social ostracism from the religious and social life of the community; physical harassment and even violence.

Of course, not all widows face these various sources of disadvantage and insecurity. Some widows live with their sons (and their families) and enjoy their respect and love. Other widows are happily integrated in the home of their married daughter, brother, parents or in-laws. But most widows must manage on their own (those who do live independently) or earn their keep (those who live as dependents). And some widows, particularly young widows, are vulnerable to mistreatment.

What then are the expressed needs and demands of rural widows? In 1994, twenty-five widows from nine states of India (including the seven states covered in my field study) attended a three-day workshop which had been organized to allow the widows to share problems, exchange experiences and voice demands.[2] The widows formed a very diverse group in terms of age, caste, occupation and income. Various participatory training methods were used to facilitate communication despite the barrier of language (nine languages were represented), including games, exercises and skits. The workshop covered a range of issues and concerns raised by the participants, including: changes in women's identity and status with widowhood; images of good and bad women; taboos regarding the behaviour of widows; options, constraints and choices regarding remarriage;

2 The workshop was followed by a conference which brought together about sixty-five activists, scholars and policy-makers who have worked on issues relating to widowhood in India. The demands of the widows were presented at the closing session of the conference. For a full account of the workshop and conference proceedings, see Chenand Drèze 1995*b*.

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living arrangements and sources of support; struggles by widows to secure their property rights; other actions taken by widows to assert their individual or collective rights; demands of the widows on society and on government.

The workshop helped to bring out what the experience of widowhood is for an Indian woman today. Several aspects of that experience were frequently mentioned by most participants, despite their widely differing social and regional backgrounds. First, a woman who loses her husband has to adjust the entire basis of her life and work: who she lives with, how she earns her livelihood, her access to her husband's property etc. Second, the negotiations involved in these adjustments are typically much easier if she has adult sons or supportive parents and brothers. Third, most widows received very little support from their in-laws. In fact, relations with in-laws are often quite tense. Finally, the primary concerns of the widows who participated in this workshop were having a house or land in their own name; a secure job, source of livelihood, or maintenance; education for their children; and last but not least, a positive social image. More specifically, the demands put forward by the widows were:

- *Housing*: including automatic transfer of the conjugal house to the widow's name upon the death of her husband, or allotment of a house site and housing by the government;
- *Land*: including automatic transfer of land (and other property) to the widow's name upon the death of her husband;
- *Employment*: including automatic transfer of the husband's job to the widow (or her son) or training, credit and other services for self-employment;
- *Children's education*: including scholarships; stipends to cover the costs of books, uniforms and transport; and boarding facilities.

And, for those widows who cannot secure property rights or pursue gainful employment, the widows demanded:

- *Social Security*: pensions or other forms of social security from the government.

This is not an unreasonable set of demands. Indeed, they represent a set of basic entitlements which most governments, including the government of India, are committed to providing all of their citizens. However, to date, the government of India has treated widows as a single vulnerable group which is seen to need pensions only—the underlying assumption being that most widows are elderly and that all widows are inactive and dependent. As this set of demands indicates, not all widows are elderly (many are young) or inactive (many are gainfully employed or seeking work) or dependent (many of them manage on their own or support young children).

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Most fundamentally, the widows demanded dignity and respect, a positive social image and identity. This too is not an unreasonable demand, but it relates to the image and identity of women in general, and not only widows, in Indian society. This demand cannot be met through government legislation or intervention. The dignity, respect and positive social identity demanded by widows must be granted by Indian society at large.

Transforming Widowhood

The end of the workshop was marked by a very moving farewell ceremony. All the participants stood in a circle holding a long chain of flowers and joined in a joyful song celebrating spring and renewal. The chain of flowers was then cut into as many garlands as there were participants. Each participant tied a string of flowers on another participant's wrist. Then each participant spoke about what she would do after returning home. Some widows resolved to break the taboos relating to their dress (by wearing forbidden items like colourful bangles, colourful clothes, *bindi* or *kumkum*), and to encourage other widows to do the same; others said that they would speak to other widows, women and their communities about the workshop, or participate more actively in local *panchayat* (village council) meetings. As these pledges were being made, in a spontaneous gesture of solidarity, some of the married women put their bracelets on the wrists of the widows and their *bindis* on their foreheads. The activists resolved to campaign against the use of pejorative terms for widows; to insist that widows should be invited to marriage and other ceremonies; to incorporate a focus on widows in their on-going work; to survey widows in their areas of operation; to help widows secure pensions; and to help widows take up legal cases to defend their property rights.

For many of the widows who participated in the workshop, this event was an entirely new experience. Most were interacting for the first time with women who spoke different languages. All were sharing their personal experience of widowhood in a group meeting for the first time. Each made a spirited contribution to the discussion. What emerged was a strong sense not only of common suffering but also of common strength. Clearly, each widow had negotiated the specific circumstances of her widowhood with dignity and courage: whether by taking up a job for the first time, by cultivating her own land, by educating her children, by fighting for her property rights, by establishing an independent household or even by joining a local women's organization.

The workshop began a process of transformation among the widows themselves. None of them had the opportunity, at least since widowhood and perhaps since marriage, to talk at length with other women—much less to sing, dance, act and laugh. The workshop made them aware of a real

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possibility of creating a new identity for themselves and a sisterhood with other widows.

There is a need to create more opportunities for widows to come together and redefine their image as women with dignity and rights. And there is a need to create more opportunities for the society as a whole, as well as policy-makers, to listen to widows and hear their demands.

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