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By Deborah Hastings

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Tsunami Widows Cast Into India's Underclass

CUDDALORE, India — Even before the tsunami ripped away her husband, Vallatha was the subject of gossip and derision, through no fault of her own.

Because her eyes are a stunning shade of green, an unusual twist of genetics in a country of brown-eyed people, she was considered evil. Behind her back, villagers call her the "cat-eyed woman."

Adding to her reputation was the fact she married her husband because she loved him. That is not a valued reason to wed in this seaside village. Here, marriages are arranged by parents based on similarities of social status and the size of the bride's dowry. Worse, after 15 years of marriage, her husband recently took up with the woman next door. To save face among disapproving neighbors, he took that woman as his second wife, which violates Hindu custom. Vallatha was shamed.

Now she sits on the floor of her mother-in-law's stone house. The tsunami, which killed five men in this poor village of 200 families, has left her penniless, homeless and a new member of one of the lowest rungs of Indian society: widowhood.

For the rest of her life, she must depend on the continued good graces of her in-laws. Without them, she could lose her children and her place in this tight-knit community. She can never remarry.

In India, for all of its recent modernization and openness to foreign cultures, being a widow remains one of the worst stigmas a woman can endure, and women are far from equal here. When her husband dies, the widow often becomes a pariah, excluded from family gatherings for fear the mere fall of her shadow will bring bad luck and tragedy.

In the North, many journey to the holy cities of Vrindavan and Varanasi, where they beg, and are paid a pittance to recite prayers in the temple. The ruby dots on their foreheads, which denote a married Hindu woman, will be replaced with a smear of chalky white. They can be forced to shave their heads and dress only in white so that they will not induce carnal urges in another man.

There are an estimated 30 million widows in India, the most in any country. Despite the continued work of women's rights groups and an abundance of political rhetoric decrying such treatment, the degradation continues, steeped in cultural rules thousands of years old.

The practice of suttee, in which a woman throws herself, or is sometimes pushed, onto the funeral pyre of her husband, has been forbidden by law for more than a century. But it has happened since then. In 1996, nine years after Roop Kanwar was burnt along with her husband's body, a trial court in Neem Ka Thana acquitted her accused in-laws.

A recent study by the Guild of Service, an Indian rights group, described widowhood this way: "Her life is socially, culturally and emotionally dead. Widowed women are harassed, abused, and denied land and livelihood."

Vallatha has no knowledge of such studies. But she knows, with a heavy heart, what she must do. She must keep peace in her mother-in-law's house, where she now lives with her two children, a daughter, 13, and a son, 11. She must sleep in the same room with her husband's second wife, Vanaroja, who sits in the shadows, just behind Vallatha, watching with downcast eyes.

"I am dependent on my mother-in-law to take care of me," Vallatha says carefully, casting a wary look at her husband's mother, who scrutinizes Vallatha's every word. A crowd of villagers presses into the doorway, keen to hear what the widow is saying.

"I am living only for my children. Right now I have no other choice. I must do what they tell me. I will not fight."

She misses her husband terribly.

Rukumani, her mother in law, produces a picture of him, a handsome man with lustrous dark hair. Vallatha trails her finger over his face. "He would stand by me to protect the children," she says. "I don't know if I can do it alone."

Vallatha was selling fish, caught by her husband and other men in the village, at the downtown market when the tsunami hit a month ago. As word of the crashing waves carried through the market, Vallatha set off for home. Along the dirt path, a neighbor told her that people crushed by the salt water had been taken to the government hospital.

Vallatha changed direction. When she walked into the hospital, more than 100 bodies were sprawled side by side, covering every space of the floor.

Her husband's was third from the door. "I was hoping he would be living," she says softly.

Vanaroja, wife No. 2, has secondary status behind Vallatha. She is 25, and was living with another woman in the village when she began her affair with Rul. She is asked how she will survive in this cramped two-room house with four new occupants. "Even if there are problems, I will have to live with them," she says. "I don't have any parents. I am confident these people will not throw me out," she says, beaming a hopeful smile at her mother-in-law.

More Indians in 'city of widows'

By Jyotsna Singh
BBC News, Delhi

The number of young Hindu widows seeking refuge in India's holy city of Vrindavan - nicknamed "the city of widows" - is rising, a study says.

The study, funded by the United Nations women's organisation Unifem, found it was poverty, and not spirituality, that was driving women to Vrindavan.

The report said that poor and helpless women went to the northern city to escape "humiliation and dependence".

Nearly 15,000 widows are believed to be living on the streets of Vrindavan.

Widows are traditionally ostracised in India and the new study shows their plight remains pretty much unchanged.

Unaware of help

It says that almost 80% of the widows who come to Vrindavan - in the state of Uttar Pradesh - are from West Bengal, and a large number of them are very young.

All this is despite the fact that West Bengal has one of the highest pension schemes offered by the government for widows, almost \$20 (£10) a month.

A well-known journalist, Usha Rai, carried out the research. She said that widows go to Vrindavan because often they are not aware of government policies to help them.

She said charities in Vrindavan are relatively well-off as they receive huge donations.

She recommended "rehabilitation and skilled training" for widows so that they are not dependant on charity alone.

But these women are often driven away because their families see them as a drain on their finances.

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