SUPREME COURT OF INDIA & WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN

Judicial Intervention and Efforts by Sulabh International, Transformed the Lives of Widows of Vrindavan, Varanasi and Uttarakhand

Bindeshwar Pathak
The widows of Vrindavan tying Rakhi to the Hon'ble President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee.
SUPREME COURT OF INDIA
&
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN

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Bindeshwar Pathak

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Bindeshwar Pathak, a Ph.D. and D. Litt. in Sociology, is the Founder of Sulabh Sanitation and Social Reform Movement. Dr. Pathak is a versatile genius who has made pathbreaking contributions to society without the power of post or money. He has turned the pages of India's long history of untouchability, social discrimination, and the mass practice of open defecation. In recent years, he has given a new life to the long-suffering widows of India.

The Sulabh Founder is a Renaissance Man who combines in his multifaceted personality the traits of a social scientist, an engineer, an administrator and an institution-builder. What is remarkable is that he has ingeniously utilized all these talents to enrich and empower the depressed classes and improve community health, hygiene and environmental sanitation. He is thus fulfilling the dreams of two national icons—Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar.

Dr. Pathak is a great humanist and social reformer of contemporary India. To the weaker sections of society especially, his is the compassionate face of a paternal redeemer. He has the vision of a philosopher and the zeal of a missionary. An icon of sanitation and social reform, he has made a difference in the lives of millions of people. With his efforts the erstwhile untouchables have been allowed by the society to intermingle with them, to live on a par with them, dine with them and pray with them in the temples. He has created a new culture that embraces the poor and extols the dignity of labour. His boundless love for the downtrodden finds expression in myriad and tangible ways. No wonder those who know him swear that Dr. Pathak is born to help the helpless.

He is the leader of an international crusade for restoration of human rights and dignity to millions of scavengers (cleaners and carriers of human excreta), traditionally known
as untouchables, and for providing safe and hygienic human waste disposal system which can benefit 700 million Indians who go out for open defecation. Dr. Pathak’s multi-pronged efforts in bringing scavengers, worst victims of institutionalized caste discrimination and engaged in a sub-human occupation, in the mainstream of national life, have taken the shape of a movement for social justice and social reform.

Dr. Pathak is an internationally acclaimed expert on sanitation and he has developed and implemented on pan-Indian scale a low-cost and appropriate toilet technology, popularly known as the Sulabh Shauchalaya System. This invention has been declared as a Global Best Practice by United Nations HABITAT and United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS).
Hon’ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi loves the poor and the downtrodden from the core of his heart. He gave dignity to the women of Vrindavan and Varanasi twice by providing them the opportunity to tie Rakhi on his wrist and showed his compassion to the cause of widows.
During the hearing of the aforesaid case on 03.08.2012 Hon’ble Supreme Court asked the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) to enquire whether Sulabh International Social Service Organisation is willing to make arrangements for supply of food to the destitute women living in the different government run homes in the Vrindavan area.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Preface**  
XV-XVI

**Acknowledgements**  
XVII

Introduction  
1 – 16

1. Public Interest Litigation and Widows of Vrindavan  
17–22

2. First Steps by Sulabh  
23–44

3. Sulabh takes care of widows by providing them medical and other facilities  
45–50

4. Last Rites with proper Hindu rituals  
51–52

5. From desolation to colour  
53–60

6. Widows of Vrindavan learning different skills  
61–66

7. Widows rejuvenate when colours are back in their lives  
67–84

8. Raksha Bandhan  
85–100

9. Visit to Kolkata: Proud moment in aircraft  
101–104

10. Emotional homecoming for widows from Vrindavan during Durga puja  
105–120

11. Press Conference in Kolkata  
121–126

12. Breaking the taboo: Widows of Vrindavan celebrating the festival of Diwali  
127–136

13. Chhath Puja  
137–144

14. Ujjain Kumbh Mela  
145–148

15. Widows of Varanasi  
149–170
16. ‘Village of Widows’ at Deoli-Bhanigram, Uttarakhand 171–185

Pictorial Vignettes of the Widows of Vrindavan and Varanasi 186 - 211

Interaction of Widows with Eminent personalities at Sulabh campus 212–224

Conferences attended by the widows 225–230

Salute to Widows of Vrindavan 231

Quotes of Dr. Pathak 232

Proposed draft bill for the consideration of the Members of Parliament about the widows in India 233–241

Views of the Press 242–344
Supreme Court of India and Widows of Vrindavan elucidates the role of judiciary in promoting social justice of the marginalised in a democratic society. It is an illuminating case study of how the intervention by India’s Apex Court and the efforts of NGO Sulabh International helped ameliorate the lives of widows of Vrindavan.

In 2011, The Hindu newspaper wrote an article about the pathetic plight of the widows of Vrindavan, who were living in abject poverty, deprived of any social security schemes. This promoted the National Legal Services Authorities (NALSA) to take action. It filed a social justice litigation before the Supreme Court for ameliorating the pitiable condition of these women and directing the District Legal Services Authority of Mathura to conduct a survey of the destitute women. A year after, on hearing the PIL for the protection of fundamental rights of the abandoned and destitute widows in Vrindavan and to prevent the abandonment of aged and destitute widows by their children or relatives, the Supreme Court chose Sulabh International to help the unfortunate widows of Vrindavan.

What followed was an extraordinary transformation in the lives of widows. During the last few years, Sulabh International under my leadership has initiated a number of measures to empower the widows and ensure that they lead a life of dignity in their twilight years. Sulabh started by giving each widow a monthly stipend of Rs. 2000 for their food and educating them in three languages—Bangla, Hindi and English. It also gave them vocational training in different fields like tailoring, garland making, making incense-sticks, etc. This made them financially independent, and also gave them a sense of empowerment, as they now have the voice and the agency to take ownership of their lives.

Four years since the landmark judgement, in a marked departure from the age-old tradition, over a thousand widows played Holi in the ancient Gopinath temple. This historic event caught the national imagination and sparked a nationwide debate about the suffering of widows and the fossilised traditions that deprive them of their
basic rights and their right to equality like the rest of society. Besides our work for the
widows in Vrindavan, Sulabh under my leadership, came forward to help the widows
of Varanasi and those women who lost their husbands during the Uttarakhand floods
in 2013.

In his work ‘Social Action Litigation: The Indian Express’, Justice Bhagwati has
observed: “Today, we find that in Third World countries, there are a large number
of groups which are being subjected to exploitation, injustice and even violence.
In this climate of conflict and injustice, judges have to play a positive role and they
cannot content themselves by invoking the doctrine of self-restraint and passive
interpretation. The judges in India have fortunately a most potent judicial power in
their hands, namely the power of judicial review. The judiciary has to play a vital and
important role not only in preventing the remedying abuse and misuse of power but
also in eliminating exploitation and injustice.”

Keeping with that spirit, Justice Panchal, one of the judges on the division bench which
admitted this Public Interest Litigation (PIL), wrote that the “limits of Supreme Court
when it chases injustice, is the sky itself.” The interest and persistence with which the
Supreme Court has heard this case and ordered NALSA and National Commission
for Women (NCW) to conduct several detailed studies is a living testimony to the
efforts Supreme Court makes to render justice.

Bindeshwar Pathak
This book would not have been possible without the participation and assistance of many people. It is difficult to name all of them, but their contributions are sincerely appreciated and gratefully acknowledged.

I am thankful to all Sulabh volunteers who variously helped me in compiling this book. I would like to especially thank Mr. Kumar Dilip, Mr. B.B. Sahay, Prof. Satyendra Tripathi, Mr. Sutirtha Sahariah, Mr. Madan Jha, Mr. Subodh Kumar Jha, Mr. Suresh Prasad, Mr. Deabrata Chatterjee, Dr. Namita Mathur, Dr. Ravindra Kumar, Mr. Akhilesh Kumar Thakur, Mr. Pramod Kumar Thakur, Mrs. Abha Kumar, Mrs. Vinita Verma, Mrs. Anita Agarwal, Mrs. Sumitri Ray, Mrs. Nigar Imam, Mr. Shashi Dhar, Dr. Shailesh Kumar, Mr. Mukesh Kumar, Mr. Rohit Kumar, Mr. Krishna, Ms. Chandan Rawat, Mr. Dhananjay Pathak, Mrs. Aarti Arora, Mrs. Tarun Sharma, Mr. Hari Singh and Miss Sudha Yadav, for their help and support. And my special thanks to Mr. Sanjeeb Kumar (IRAS), Mr. Xavier Zimbardo and Mr. Rajeev Tyagi for providing valuable suggestions.

I take this opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude to my wife Mrs. Amola Pathak, my daughter-in-law Mrs. Nitya Pathak, my daughter Mrs. Madhu Bala Sharma, my grandchildren—Miss Jyotsna Pathak, Miss Aankshka Sharma, Master Aryaman Pathak and Mr. Rohan Sharma—who always supported my mission, sustained me emotionally and joyously participated in all the activities.

I would also like to sincerely thank all my friends and all those who in one way or other extended their precious support, whether morally, financially and physically.

Bindeshwar Pathak
When Chaitanya Mahaprabhu settled in Vrindavan in the year 1515 as a devotee of Lord Krishna, he realised the pitiable conditions of the widows of West Bengal living in the slums there. These widows were ostracised, humiliated and finally abandoned by their own family members, shunned as a burden. Persistent torture and humiliation inflicted on elderly women forced them to leave their home and lead a life of insecurity and suffering.

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu advised the widows to come to Vrindavan, lead a life of devotion, sing bhajans, worship Lord Krishna and seek salvation. However, with time this tradition degraded and widows travelling to Vrindavan were no longer treated with dignity.

The condition of the widows of Vrindavan became so critical that they had to beg for food and they had no medical facility. By singing bhajans twice a day from different temples, they earned only eight rupees a day (four rupees in the morning and four rupees in the evening). Their lives were miserable and even worse were their deaths. After their death, their bodies used to be chopped off and thrown in the river Yamuna, thus depriving them a proper cremation as per the Hindu rites.

The conditions in general of women in India leave a lot to be desired. Among them, the worst lot is that of the widows. After the death of her husband, a stigma of inauspiciousness is attached to the widow. Seeing a widow while one is embarking on a journey or doing some important work is considered ominous. They become inauspicious for even their own families. They were not allowed to participate in family functions like wedding. A widowed mother was not supposed to be present even at the wedding ceremony of her own son or daughter.

One can imagine their plight, as the widows are not allowed to participate in the marriage rituals of their own children. If there is a family function, widows
are ordered to go inside their rooms and remain confined to her room till the function is over. At the turn of her own biggest personal tragedy – her husband's death – an otherwise normal woman, singing, laughing, wearing coloured clothes and generally enjoying life, is suddenly condemned, ostracized, stigmatized and forced to lead an austere life. She is made to break her bangles. Her once proud locks are shaved off. She is allowed to wear only white saree and eat only simple vegetarian food without onion and garlic. She is forced to lead an austere and pious life, reciting bhajans and worshiping deities, but forbidden from participating in any social, religious and auspicious functions. Most of the time, she has to remain in isolation and not allowed to participate in festivals like Holi or Diwali. Thus, she is turned into a living corpse.

While the condition of women in general and widows in particular has significantly improved over the years since independence after several legislative and executive steps, still hundreds of women find themselves in ashrams in religious places like Vrindavan and Varanasi. Driven by ostracism by their families and often without any legal recourse to hold on to the property left over by their deceased husbands, they became rudderless, and had hope to find some solace in the land of Krishna. Little did they know that the life in Vrindavan would hardly be an improvement over the desperate life, they had left behind in their homes. Often, life would be harsher in the ashrams, where at times they had to sing bhajans for hours for a paltry meal.

Around 2011-12, the news of the plight of the widows of Vrindavan was being published in several newspapers. Several journalists like Ms. Aarti Dhar of The Hindu did some excellent stories, describing how the widows were living in extreme wretchedness and facing starvation. To eke out their living, the widows would sing bhajans in the local ashrams and would earn paltry Rs. 8 a day. Survival on this money was extremely difficult, but death was even worse.

A few years ago, the NGO, Environmental and Consumer Protection Foundation, through its counsel Ravindra Bana, in December 2007, had brought to the notice of the Supreme Court the abject penury of these widows. A three judge bench of the court, including the then Chief Justice K G Balakrishnan, R V Raveendran and J M Panchal looked into whether intervention was required in what on the face of it looked like voluntary stay at the widow ashrams but after a brief submission, the court agreed that intervention was indeed needed. Justice Panchal, one of the judges on the division bench which admitted this Public Interest Litigation (PIL) writing for himself and the two other brother judges, said that the “limits of Supreme Court, when it chases injustice, is the sky itself.”
The interest and persistence with which the Supreme Court heard this case and ordered NALSA and NCW to conduct several detailed studies, is a living testimony to the efforts Supreme Court made to render justice.

While hearing the petition, the Hon’ble Judges directed the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) to contact Sulabh International Social Service Organisation and find out whether we would help improving the conditions of the widows of Vrindavan. The NALSA’s letter reached Sulabh on 6th August, 2012 and the General Body of Sulabh International Social Service Organisation and I happily accepted the proposal. The Sulabh International had already worked for the emancipation of manual scavengers and has for nearly five decades been at the forefront of changing the face of public hygiene in India. Yet, this was a new area of activity for Sulabh.

However, Sulabh rose to the occasion and did not waste a minute after the receipt of the letter from NALSA, and a team led by me visited Vrindavan on the 11th and 12th August, 2012 and again for three days from the 20th August, 2012. Though these were meant to be exploratory trips, we took along with us a team of doctors and voluntary social workers of Sulabh, who could provide on the spot medical help and immediate assistance to the widows. We were not prepared for the heart rending scenes we saw at the Mahila Ashray Sadan-I & II and later at the other ashrams. We had heard about the poor conditions at the ashrams but the reality was much starker. This was the beginning of Sulabh’s association with the widows of Vrindavan.

Encouraged with our work with the ladies at Vrindavan, we started working with the widows in similar conditions in Varanasi, and went on to adopt a village in Uttarakhand, where dozens of young ladies had lost their husbands in the floods of 2013.

Here we have the story of how through judicial intervention at the highest level, along with the dedicated ground work by Sulabh, resulted in transformation of the lives of these women. Today, they are much better off and Sulabh has literally and figuratively brought some colour and light into their lives through celebrations of Holi and Diwali.

I would like to say at this stage that these are still early days, and I hope that Sulabh will be able to equip the widows to progressively outgrow the ashrams themselves and become a part of the social mainstream.
BEGGING BY WIDOWS IN VRINDAVAN
Bodies taken away by sweepers, cut into pieces and disposed of in jute bags

The bodies of widows who die in government-run shelter homes in Vrindavan are taken away by sweepers at night, cut into pieces, put into jute bags and disposed of as the institutions do not have any provision for a decent funeral. This, too, is done only after the inmates give money to the sweeper!

This shocking fact has come to light in a survey by the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) on the “Plight of Forsaken/Forlorn Women — Old and Widows Living in Vrindavan and Radius.”

Taking cognisance of a report published in The Hindu on August 11 on the plight of the widows living in Vrindavan in Mathura district of Uttar Pradesh, Justice Altamash Kabir, Executive Chairperson of the National Legal Services Authority, had asked the U.P. State Legal Services Authority to survey the conditions of the women.

The terms of reference also included ascertaining whether there were peculiar family circumstances which led to abandonment of the women by their families or children which was actionable under Section 24 of the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007.

The report, a copy of which is available with The Hindu, has recommended that the District Magistrates be directed to protect the property and property rights of these women. It wanted them to take necessary steps to restore the property to the destitute women in accordance with law which would facilitate their return home and enable them to lead a dignified life.

It has also suggested that legal aid clinics be set up to generate awareness among these women about various Acts and their rights and provide assistance wherever needed.

The District Legal Services Authority in its report quoted Mithilesh Solanki, a widow living in Swadhar Mahila Ashray Kendra, Chaitanya Vihar (Vrindavan), to reveal the “sorry state of affairs and disheartening fact that sweepers take away the dead bodies in the night, cut them into pieces and dispose them of in jute bags.”
The institution, started by the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development in 2006 and run by a non-governmental organisation Akhil Bharatiya Maa Sharda Samaj Kalyan Samiti, does not undertake the responsibility of arranging funerals.

Similar conditions prevail in another residential institution established by the U.P. Mahila Samaj Kalyan Nigam — the only of its kind run by the State government under its Meera Sahbhagini scheme.

The report, prepared by Sapna Tripathi, ACJM and Vijay Bahadur Yadav, chairman (DLSA) and district judge, Mathura along with some other members is based on personal interaction with the widows and the data provided by the government and non-government agencies. The official figures provided by the District Probation Office and Social Welfare Department at Mathura puts the number of abandoned women in the entire district at 3151 — a large number of whom were shunned by their conservative and orthodox families in certain parts of West Bengal and persuaded or even forced by the family members to live a ‘sacred widowed life’ in Vrindavan after the death of her husband.

In most cases widows are denied remarriage even after the death of their husband in childhood or young age. While some are forced to leave the marital home and native place by the family members just to avoid maintenance in old age and bearing the burden of a non-productive family member, many others leave their homes due to physical and mental torture.

The report details the plight of these women, some of whom get a monthly pension of Rs. 300 and a measly quantity of food grain and sugar which is woefully inadequate for survival. As a result, they are forced to beg and sing in temples from where they can earn two or three rupees a day.

The living quarters are unhygienic with little or no facilities for toilets and drinking water. Medical facilities are only on paper. But due to lack of education, the women are often deprived of the paltry sum they are entitled to under the National Social Assistance Programme, Antodaya Scheme and Food Money Scheme as the funds are often pilfered.

Recommending setting up of sufficient shelter homes with proper facilities, the DLSA report said the Centre and the State governments are expected to fulfil the basic needs guaranteed by the Constitution and protect the human rights of the widows. It has also suggested proper audit of the funds received by the NGOs and private charitable institutions.

Source: http://m.thehindu.com/news/national/dignity-denied-even-in-death-for-vrindavan-widows/article2784876.ece
BEGGING BY WIDOWS IN VRINDAVAN
WIDOWS IN VRINDAVAN IN DEPLORABLE CONDITION BEFORE SULABH CAME IN THEIR LIFE
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN BEFORE SULABH CAME IN THEIR LIVES
CRAWLING IN PENURY
STARK LIVES OF THE WIDOWS
Public Interest Litigation (PIL) is defined as the use of litigation in public interest, seeking to redress the cause of disadvantaged groups or individuals, or which raises issues of broad public concern. It is a way to use the law strategically to effect social change. In India, while law was being used for achieving desired social change, the process of litigation being expensive, the disadvantaged persons or groups could not approach the court directly. When a public-spirited individual or an institution tried to approach the court, their locus standi was often questioned.

The concept of Public Interest Litigation is in consonance with the principles enshrined in Article 39A of the Constitution of India to protect and deliver prompt social justice with the help of law. Before the 1980s, only the aggrieved party could approach the court for justice. After the emergency era, the high court reached out to the people, devising a means for any person of the public (or an NGO) to approach the court seeking legal remedy in cases where the public interest is at stake.

Justice P N Bhagwati and Justice V R Krishna Iyer were among the first judges to admit PILs in court. Filing a PIL is not as cumbersome as a usual legal case; there have been instances when letters and telegrams addressed to the court have been taken up as PILs and heard. Justice P N Bhagwati, writing the judgement in the landmark case, S P Gupta versus Union of India, gave a concrete shape to the nebulous concept:

“If public duties are to be enforced and social collective ‘diffused’, rights and interests are to be protected, we have to utilise the initiative and zeal of public-minded persons and organisations by allowing them to move the court and act for a general or group interest, even though they may not be directly injured in their own rights. It is for this reason that in public interest litigation — litigation undertaken for the purpose of redressing public injury, enforcing public duty, protecting social, collective, ‘diffused’
rights and interests or vindicating public interest, any citizen who is acting in bona fide manner, and who has sufficient interest has to be accorded standing.

We may point out that this was precisely the principle applied by this Court to uphold the standing of the Fertiliser Corporation Kamgar Union to challenge the sale of a part of the undertaking by the Fertiliser Corporation of India in Fertiliser Corporation Kamgar Union versus Union of India AIR 1981 SC 344 (supra)”. In that case Justice Krishna Iyer pointed out that if a citizen “belongs to an organisation which has special interest in the subject-matter, if he has some concern deeper than that of a busybody, he cannot be told off at the gates, although whether the issue raised by him is justiciable may still remain to be considered.”

**Cause Supreme**

Ever since it is the cause that is seen rather than the person approaching the courts that is taken into account, while seeing the admissibility of litigation by the higher judiciary. Yet, it took over twenty five years for a case to be admitted when there appeared to be no legal wrong but grave injustice was being faced by the group affected. The NGO, Environmental and Consumer Protection Foundation, through its counsel Ravindra Bana, brought to the notice of the court that widows who congregate for Bhajans for around 7-8 hours only get Rs. 8 per day. The court initially was reluctant to entertain the PIL, which was largely based on the newspaper reports. It was perhaps the court chasing up to the sky to fight injustice by using its power under Article 136, even before it was formulated six years later in another judgement written by Justice J M Panchal, who was one of the judges on this bench. While the court has held more than thirty hearings so far and a lot has been done to ameliorate the condition of the widows in Vrindavan and elsewhere, the Supreme Court has not given up on making things better.

An article “Prayers in Penury” in The Hindu published in August 2011, on the condition of widows in Vrindavan written by Special Correspondent Aarti Dhar, depicted the plight of about 140 widows in different old age homes like Mahila Ashray Sadan, Meera Sahbhagini Ashram and Ma Dham in Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh. This prompted the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) to give a series of directions to the Mathura District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) to address their grievances. In order to alleviate the misery of these women and with a view to providing social justice, Justice Altamas Kabir, Judge, Supreme Court and Executive Chairman, NALSA, took immediate action and on his instructions, the NALSA issued directions to the DLSA, Mathura, U.P, to set up a team of committed panel lawyers, preferably women lawyers and para-legal volunteers to identify and locate the old and forlorn widows living in the different Ashrams, Sadans and Dhams in the Vrindavan area of Mathura district and ascertain the living conditions of such
old abandoned and forlorn widows and prepare a list of such women with details regarding the circumstances, which led them to reach the present state of affairs and to find out whether the old women under the survey have been getting any beneficial schemes of the State and the Central government.

Finally, Action!

The NALSA wanted DLSA to prepare a list of such women with details regarding the circumstances which led them to reach the present state of affairs, and also to find out whether the old women under survey have been enjoying any beneficial schemes of the state and central governments. The NALSA further directed the DLSA to identify the different schemes and measures of protection provided by the law for such old hapless women; and whether there were any family circumstances leading to the abandonment of such women by the family members or children which are actionable under Section 24 of Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 and provide legal aid to such old women, in appropriate cases by invoking provisions of Sections 5 and 23 of the Act.

This led to a flurry of activities by the Mathura DLSA and on receiving the report, NALSA found that situation was more serious than that they had anticipated. By virtue of Section 4(d) of the Legal Services Act, the NALSA decided to take action by way of social justice litigation as a matter relating to weaker section of the society. Thus, the PIL by NALSA (WP(C) No.133/2012) was filed for protection of the fundamental rights of the women/widows in Vrindavan and to prevent the abandonment of aged and destitute women/widows by their relatives.

This added a statutory dimension to the PIL and the restoration of fundamental rights became a theme as well. The two PILs are now heard together and the condition of the widows became a major subject. More than thirty hearings have been made and during one such hearing of the case on 3.8.2012, the Supreme Court asked the NALSA to enquire whether Sulabh International Social Service Organisation (SISSO) was willing to make arrangements for supply of food to the destitute women living in different government homes in the Vrindavan area. The NALSA thereafter requested Sulabh International Social Service Organisation to consider the matter in the most benevolent manner and inform the authority of their views.

This direction of the division bench comprising of Justices D K Jain and Madan B Lokur proved to be a game changer. So far the Court was trying to appreciate the situation and compile data. Now they tried to force a change in the living condition of the widows. Judicial intervention was in the direction of changing the dreary life of the widows to more comfortable ones.
F.No.L/15/2011/NALSA 2364
Dated: 6th August, 2012

To

The Sulabh International Social Service Organisation
Sulabh Gram, Mahavir Enclave
Palam Dabri Road
New Delhi - 110 045

Sir,

Respected Sir,

The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) under its mandate under Section 4(d) of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 has filed a social justice litigation before the Supreme Court of India for protection and amelioration of the different problems faced by a large number of old and destitute women popularly known as ‘Vrindavan Widows’ who Live in the Vrindavan area of Mathura District. They come to Vrindavan seeking the blessings of Lord Krishna, who according to their faith, was born and lived in Mathura. They eke their livelihood by singing bhajans in the Ashrams and temples etc. Some are begging in the streets. A few of them come there on their own will. A large number of them are forced to be in Vrindavan area on account of poverty and lack of support from their own families, once they become widows. Some have been abandoned in Vrindavan area by their own close relatives. Many of them live in the government run homes under pathetic conditions without any proper food, medical and hygienic facilities.

When the National Legal Services Authority filed a writ petition before Hon’ble Supreme Court of India for ameliorating the pathetic conditions of the lives of ‘Vrindavan Widows’, the Hon’ble Court directed the District Legal Services Authority, Mathura (under the Chairmanship of the District Judge, Mathura) to conduct enumeration of the ‘Vrindavan Widows’. 
The District Legal Services Authority has submitted an enumerated report indicating the details and photos of destitute women including those living in different government run homes and in the homes run by the NGOs. One common fact which was noticed from the survey was that in all the different homes for the ‘Vrindavan Widows’ there is no facility for food. Usually, ‘Vrindavan Widows’ cook food using the rations they received under the Antyodaya Annapurna Yojana. They purchase food grains from the ration shop from out of the money they earned by singing bhajans which in the normal circumstances is a meagre sum of Rs. 4/- per day per person. But a good number of women are forced to remain in the shelter homes itself not being able to go out, on account of the severe geriatric problems like of poor eye-sight, broken bones and inability to walk. They are being helped by other women living in the shelter homes by sharing their food with them.

During the hearing of the aforesaid case on 03.08.2012 Hon’ble Supreme Court asked the National Legal Services Authority to enquire whether Sulabh International Social Service Organisation is willing to make arrangements for supply of food to the destitute women living in the different government run homes in the Vrindavan area. According to the survey report prepared by the District Legal Services Authority, Mathura, the homes run by the government and the different NGOs where the ‘Vrindavan Widows’ live are: (i) Mahila Asray Sadan situated at Ramanuj Nagar; (ii) Mahila Asray Sadan situated at Chaitanya Vihar; (iii) Mahila Asray Sadan situated at Chaitanya Vihar Phase-II; (iv) Meera Sahbhagini Kendra (established by Govt. of U.P.); (v) All India Women’s Conference (Taraash Mandir); and (v) (Amar Badi) now (Ma-Dham).

The case stands posted to 03.09.2012 for further orders. In the meantime, the National Legal Services Authority requests the Sulabh International Social Service Organisation to consider this matter in the most benevolent manner and inform this Authority whether they can take care of the requirements of food for the destitute women living in the aforesaid homes.

Awaiting an early response.

Yours faithfully,

(U.Sarathchandran)
LIVING CONDITIONS OF WIDOWS AT VRINDAVAN
My team and I visited Vrindavan for making arrangements for the widows, as requested by the NALSA on 11th and 12th August, 2012 and again between August 20-23rd, 2012. Sulabh International Social Service Organisation had been active in the field of public hygiene for over four decades by then. We were by then fairly exposed to traumatic experiences when we tried to end the practice of manual scavenging. We fought the social stigma of untouchability and open defecation. Yet, what we saw in Vrindavan was something that we had never encountered before. Here were human beings living a life which was worse than death. They had plumbed to the depth of despair and saw no way out from the abyss that they found themselves in. I first met them on 12th August, 2012. All the widows were crying bitterly and uncontrollably and said that they wanted to die. I also wept many times with the widows while hearing about their miserable conditions, which was indeed heart-rending, in fact pathetic, to say the least. I was both shocked and in tears on hearing their stories and their plight. I consoled them and promised that henceforth Sulabh would take care of all their needs, including food. I knew that here was a difficult and challenging responsibility, but I resolved to myself to strive to the best of my ability and with all the resources and experience at my command to help them out of their present situation.

Along with the social workers of Sulabh International, I had also taken with me doctors to provide on the spot medical help and assistance to the widows. Some of them were examined and given required medical assistance. We were in Vrindavan for six days and on each of the six days, we also organised community meals for all the inmates of the ashrams. It was both gratifying and heartening to see all of them taking food to their heart’s content.

**Depths of Misery**

On the visits to Vrindavan, I sadly found that the facts regarding the plight of these widows eloquently enumerated in the NALSA’s letter of 6th August, 2012 and various
news reports, were indeed very true. For getting their daily food, the widows sang bhajans in two shifts, for which they were being paid rupees four per shift of four hours each in the mornings and evenings. They were given one meal and for the other meal, they had to fend for themselves. For want of adequate money, most of these helpless widows survived on tea, biscuits and some snacks and often went to sleep without food.

I spoke extensively with these widows and had long interactions with them. Though reticent at first, they gradually opened up and started telling me about their lives, their problems and the hardships they continued to face. I also had discussions with the officials running the various homes and other concerned persons. I enquired from them as to what they would like me and Sulabh International to do for the ladies, so that I may be able to ease their pain and sufferings. And further, what best could be done so that they are able to get their food regularly.

All of them expressed their strong desire for immediate financial help. When I showed my agreement with their views, there was indeed a clamour directly for money, and most of them wanted immediate help, so that they could at least have food regularly starting from that very day itself. This was indeed a touching and poignant moment for me. I could be of service to my fellow human beings on the precipice of despair. I am beholden to the Hon’ble Supreme Court for being gracious in giving me this opportunity to be of some help to these helpless and destitute widows. In that one moment, I realised the lengths to which their lordships of the Supreme Court had gone to ensure equity and wellbeing of all the citizens.

**Spurred Into Action**

On the spur of the moment, I took a decision to provide them immediate monetary relief so that they all would be able to at least get their meals regularly starting from that day. This relief has henceforth been provided regularly on a monthly basis. To begin with, I immediately made a cash payment of Rs. 1,000/- each to 552 widows residing in the various homes, excluding Ma-Dham, which was better run by the All India Women’s Conference (AIWC).

From my enquiries, I learnt that they were also entitled to government support of Rs 550 per month as food money plus a pension of Rs 300 for widows, as well as Mahamaya Pension of Rs 400 for old widows. They were also entitled for ration money of Rs 89 which included six kilograms of wheat, eight kilograms of rice, three litres of kerosene and 700 grams of sugar. Unfortunately, there was no timely or regular payment of the pension and food allowances, and there was also considerable delay ranging from six months to a year, which puts them to great hardship.

It was keeping in mind all these aspects, and the desire as well as request of the widows for immediate monetary help for their food that I took the decision to pay them Rs 1,000 per month. This amount enabled them to have proper food on a regular basis.
and they did not have to sleep hungry. I decided that they would receive their money on the 5th of every month.

**Funding Dignity**

The budget provisions made by Sulabh International enabled us to provide these facilities to about 2,000 women living in these ashrams in Vrindavan. But we had only been able to identify 552 of them from the five ashrams. In case of medical emergencies, five ambulances with drivers, on round the clock service, have been provided to take the sick widows to the nearby hospital. To keep them engaged and entertained, we have also provided them with five television sets. Five refrigerators were provided to the ashrams to get them cold water. Five inverters have also been provided. Also, arrangement has been made that after death their bodies are properly cremated with proper Hindu rituals. We have Sulabh Helpline for the coordination among the widows and that keeps them at ease and provides them instant help, if there is any need.

As I said earlier, by this time it was nearly four decades that I had been working in the field of sanitation. My mission in life had been to eradicate manual scavenging, restore the human rights and dignity of ‘untouchables’ by providing clean and safe toilets in individual houses and public places, to stop defecation in the open as also stop manual cleaning of human excreta by people called ‘scavengers’ and I had succeeded largely in eradicating the scourge of manual scavenging from many parts of India.

Due to my efforts, the ‘untouchables’ who were involved with manual cleaning of human excreta and carrying it as headload had been liberated from this demeaning practice. In the areas of Tonk and Alwar in Rajasthan, I led a group of these manual scavengers to the famous Nathdwara temple, where their entry was earlier forbidden, to pray side by side with the high priests of the temple. Sulabh International gave them education as well as training in vocational trades and helped them in earning their livelihoods in other vocations. Sulabh International also took a whole group of liberated women scavengers to the United Nations and at the UN General Assembly, these liberated women scavengers walked the ramp in front of a galaxy of international diplomats.

It was therefore our past experiences which gave us a template for gradually turning around the lives of the widows. I took up this cause as one of the missions of my life. I felt that with divine blessings the Hon’ble Supreme Court had intervened in the problems of the widows of Vrindavan, the problem that remained utterly neglected till then.

I realised that though they were desolate and would perhaps be relieved in seeking solace in death, but beneath their sadness there was a will in most of them to survive and, even optimism to begin a new and better life.
WIDOWS ANXIOUS TO GET THEIR NAMES REGISTERED FOR RECEIVING RS. 1000/- PER MONTH AS HONORARIUM BY SULABH
THE QUEUES ARE UNENDING, ANXIETY PERVERSIVE ON THEIR FACES
FINALLY, THEIR MESSIAH ARRIVES
Joyous Dancing is not what they knew so far
BLESS YOU MY SON: DR PATHAK OFFERS SUCCOUR
COLOURED SARIS HAD BEEN BANNED FOR THEM, NOT NOW
DR. PATHAK INTERACTING WITH THE WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN AT ASHRAMS AND TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THEIR PROBLEMS
‘I AM HAPPY TO MAKE YOU ALL HAPPY’
DR. PATHAK WITH THE WIDOWS LISTENING CAREFULLY THEIR HARDSHIPS
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN SINGING BHAJANS AND KIRTANS WITH DR. PATHAK
There is so much joy, now that Sulabh has come in and daily bread secure
COMMUNITY MEAL FOR THE WIDOWS AT VRINDAVAN ORGANISED BY SULABH INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL SERVICE ORGANISATION
All For Care!

After the initial funding for 552 widows in Vrindavan, Sulabh today is looking after about 800 widows there; about 200 widows in Varanasi and another 154 families, including 32 widows, in Deoli-Bhanigram Panchayat of the hill-state of Uttarakhand, families which had been mired in misery after a major flood swept it to near extinction in June 2013.

Apart from the help described earlier, Sulabh organises regular visits by doctors to conduct health check-ups and provide primary dental and eye care and also provide information on these points to the widows. The Sulabh doctor collects information on the health of their heart, lungs, and other vital parts. It is ensured that they get safe and treated water to drink, and the doctors make them aware about the importance of having regular bowel movement. They are also told that it is necessary that to have a healthy body, one should have a relaxed mind.

Sulabh have also provided ambulances for the widows to go to local hospitals for treatment. The cost of diesel and the drivers is also borne by Sulabh. The eyes and teeth of all the mothers were checked, and those who needed spectacles are provided with these. Sometimes monkeys take away their spectacles, but those are replaced quickly. For their proper medical care and treatment, there is a helpline of Sulabh which functions round the clock. If a mother is ill or faces any physical problem, Sulabh volunteers rush to the ashram, take her to hospital and do the needful.

At a function held at Mavalankar Hall, New Delhi on 27th September, 2012, Mrs. Manu Ghosh, a senior widow from Vrindavan, flagged off five ambulances for the Ashrayas at Vrindavan. LCD TV sets and refrigerators, one for each Ashraya have also been made available.

To keep them comfortable, fridges have been provided for cold water and large size screen with cable connection also have been provided so that the widows can view religious and other entertainment programmes and also some films and programmes in Bengali languages as a majority happen to be Bengali speaking.
MEDICAL FACILITIES BEING PROVIDED TO THE WIDOWS
‘A NEW LIFE’: FELICITATION TO THE WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN AT MAVALANKAR HALL, NEW DELHI

FIVE AMBULANCE VANS PROVIDED TO ASHRAMS OF WIDOWS IN VRINDAVAN TO TAKE CARE OF THOSE WHO NEED MEDICAL ASSISTANCE
PROVISION OF REFRIGERATORS AND LCD T.V.S TO EACH ASHRAMS AT VRINDAVAN
Smt. Manu Ghosh, a widow of Vrindavan, lighting the lamp at Mavalankar Hall, New Delhi

‘Widows of Vrindavan - A New Life’, book released by Dr. Pathak, based on different stories of their lives
Indignity had been the fate of these widows in life and death. A very important aspect which Sulabh has paid particular attention to is the cremation of the widows with full rites and rituals. Earlier, after their deaths, the bodies of the widows was put in gunny bags and disposed of in the rivers, as they could not be cremated properly due to lack of funds and initiatives.

We have given proper attention to this aspect and ensured that their last rites are performed with full honour and dignity with the help of Sulabh. The most important thing is that after the death of the widows now, the dead bodies are cremated with proper Hindu rites and rituals with sandalwood and ghee and mantras from the vedas recited by the Pandits (Priests).
WE CONSIGN HER TO YOU, GOD, AT THIS HOLY PYRE
After the basic needs of sustenance and entertainment of these widows were addressed, we then decided to move to the next level. As more than 70 percent of the widows did not know how to read and write, we arranged for basic literacy skills in Hindi, English and Bengali, which latter was the mother tongue for most of them. We also arranged for vocational training in skills, which they could gainfully use.

As the new year of 2013 tuned in, I thought that the widows who have had to suffer the ignominy of ‘inauspiciousness’ and dreariness, needed to be included in all nationally celebrated festivals. Holi was the most appropriate festival to begin with, as it would add a dash of colour and joy in the lives of the desolate widows of Vrindavan. This Holi came with a difference for the widows and abandoned women living in Vrindavan. Unlike earlier years, when these women played Holi only with ‘Thakurji’ (Lord Krishna), this time it was a riot of colours, mainly gulal (coloured powder) and petals of flowers, and lots of people to celebrate with. In a massive departure from tradition, hundreds of widows gathered to play Holi with one other with flower petals and gulal. The spirit of Holi was palpable across the five government-run homes, where Sulabh International had been giving stipends, arranging for food and providing healthcare facilities to the women.

These celebrations were held at the 100-year old Meera Sahbhagini Ashram, and were a precursor to a new kind of life they would lead. To add more colour, dozens of former conservancy workers were brought to the ashram. Interactions with them formerly conservancy workers buoyed the widows as they could see first hand, how Sulabh could be an agent for change their lives as well.

After Holi, the next mission we had was Diwali, the festival of lights. This was a satisfying progress for all of us, for this signified a fresh chapter in the history of social reforms in India, as the widows of Vrindavan lit Diwali lamps, arranged floral
rangolis and lit earthen lamps on the banks of the Holy Yamuna River, symbolising a new surge of empowerment for these widows. Now Holi has become an annual celebration in these ashrams, and we will be celebrating Diwali for the fourth time in a row this year. These celebrations have added an unusual hue, as Holi with colours and Diwali with sparklers have been introduced. The widows have become truly empowered citizens who can now ‘dare’ to have normal wishes and aspirations – denied them for more than a century.

Holi and Diwali have dispelled the gloom to a large extent from the lives of the widows, who besides learning writing and reading skills have acquired other vocational skills as well. My team and I have over the last four years been enriched by their infectious enthusiasm, and their smiling faces as the best reward we could desire for our work amongst them. I noticed wishfulness in many of the widows, when talking of the villages and towns they had left behind.

In 2013, too, I thought that a representative group could be taken to Kolkata for the city’s fabled Durga Puja. Their happiness was palpable and the ‘City of Joy’ added on their new found love for life. They could speak their language with any one and visit various Puja pandals throughout the city. This too since then has become a part of the annual calendar for the widows of Vrindavan. In fact, they had ‘winged’ their way to Kolkata, as Sulabh took them there by air.

The once downtrodden and lowly were now up in the skies, a novelty which they had never even dreamt of! From the depths of despair, these ladies had found colour and light in their lives, with a strong desire to live meaningfully and with joy, which they had never encountered in their desolate past.

To tell you the truth, those widows were only flying in the sky, something we are so accustomed to, but we at Sulabh International were in the Seventh Heaven!
THE WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN BEING TAUGHT HOW TO READ AND WRITE ENGLISH, HINDI AND BENGALI
LEARNING IN PROGRESS – AGE NO BAR
SHARING THE DELIGHT OF LIFE, KNOWLEDGE!
The first training camp to instill vocational and professional skills amongst the widows was organised at Meera Sahbhagini Ashram on February 24, 2013. I initiated the programme of teaching Hindi and Bengali languages. Subsequent to the vocational training having started, the widows were learning fast to read and write, to make garlands of Tulsi (Holy Basil) and flowers, as also incense sticks. They are also taught stitching and embroidery. A complete transformation is now visible in their lives, their attitude and behaviour. It is all written in their countenance.

Mrs. Manu Ghosh, who is residing at Meera Sahbhagini Ashram, speaking on the occasion of the training programme said, “Dr. Pathak has been sent by Sri Krishna Bhagwan himself for looking after us. Now the widows need not go out for begging to earn their livelihood.”

It was further disclosed that a businessman had lately visited Meera Sahbhagini Ashram and offered in alms Rs. 10 each to Mrs. Saraswati Goldar and her friend, both widows and both over ninety years old. The offer was humbly declined by the ladies saying that they were no more accepting such alms as they were now being looked after by Dr. Pathak Saheb from Sulabh. They now sing bhajans in their ashrams, worshipping Sri Krishna Bhagwan and Radha, while learning the work of artisans and craftpersons.
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN LEARNING SKILLS OF MAKING FLOWER GARLANDS AND NECKLACES OF BEADS
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN MAKING NECKLACES OF TULSI BEADS
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN LEARNING STITCHING AND EMBROIDERY WITH SEWING MACHINES
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN MAKING INCENSE STICKS
The widows of Vrindavan smashed an age-old taboo by celebrating Holi with flower petals in 2013, for the first time after they were condemned to a dark world of sorrows. Sulabh has been organising the festival since then. This festival was chosen because it is associated in Hindu mythology with stories interwoven with the life of Lord Krishna, who hailed from Vrindavan. The tales also symbolise the victory of good over evil. It will be only appropriate if the stories are recounted in brief here.

According to Bhagwat Puran, a demon-king named Hiranyakashipu, like other demon-kings of his ilk, had an intense desire to become immortal, and performed severe penance. This pleased Lord Brahma, who granted him the boon of not meeting death except under very improbable, in fact almost impossible conditions. This boon fuelled arrogance in Hiranyakashipu. Feeling that he is invincible, he decreed that only he be worshipped. But his own son Prahlad did not subscribe to this. Prahlad was Lord Vishnu’s devotee and kept worshipping Him. The enraged father then asked his sister Holika to destroy Prahlad. Holika had a garment that prevented her from being harmed by fire. She made Prahlad sit on her lap and – with him sat upon a blazing fire. She was not aware that the garment conferred immunity only if she sat on the fire alone. She was burnt to death. Also, Hiranyakashipu’s own boon said that no man or animal could kill him. But Lord Vishnu appeared in the avatar of Narasimha - half human and half lion – and slayed the demon-king.

This story relates to the Holika Dahan, that is, burning of Holika, which inevitably takes place as a ritual on the night preceding the annual Holi festival. And the story of Hiranyakashipu shows the result of trying to be all-powerful.

‘Blue’ Krishna, Fair Radha

There is another tale in respect of playing with colours during Holi. The story goes that Lord Krishna was born in the prison of the evil King Kansa, the Lord’s own...
maternal uncle. It had been prophesied that Kansa would meet his death at hands of the Lord. A mortified Kansa engaged Putana, a demoness, to poison the infant Lord by breastfeeding Him with the milk from her breasts, which had been smeared with a poison. But while the infant Lord merrily suckled on her, He squeezed the life out of her, literally, but pressing Putana’s nipples too hard. Little Krishna survived, but Puatana’s poison gave Him his dark blue skin colour. According to the myth, Krishna often despaired about the fair skin of his beloved Radha, and wondered whether she and the other gopis (women devotees of Krishna from Vrindavan) would accept him because of his skin colour. On the advice of his foster mother, Yashoda, therefore, he sprinkled colour over Radha’s face and those of the other ladies; and thus was born the festival of colours, that is Holi.

Smiles Back…

Holi falls in the Hindu lunar month of Phagun, the onset of the spring season, when the winter crop ripens. It is rejuvenation of nature. There is cheer all around, the mood is joyous and the spirit of brotherhood prevails when people indulge in friendly embraces to forget enmities and ill will.

Before the Supreme Court asked Sulabh to set camp in the dank world of Vrindavan, the widows there were denied all that brings happiness to a person in her day to day life. I saw widows with gaps in the rows of their teeth, from which – it seemed to me their youth had escaped; their faces were wrinkled and poverty and malnourishment crumpled their feet skin like those of crows. These were reminders of their lost physical attraction with sighs of remembrances of yore.

Several steps were taken to bring back to their faces those smiles of hope, if not the days gone by. The white saris which they were forced to wear became rainbow coloured on the day of Holi. That moment for me has become unforgettable. It will be a source of perennial joy in my life to think that not only has Sulabh been responsible for lighting up the faces of the widows, but that I have been a part of that phenomenal process.

Initially, some religious honchos objected that the traditions were being broken, but last year, even the saints, seers and other religious bigwigs celebrated and played Holi with the widows of Vrindavan. Today, they are leading a happy, noble life.
CELEBRATIONS ARE BACK IN THE LIVES OF WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN BREAKING TRADITION AND CELEBRATING HOLI FOR THE FIRST TIME WITH FLOWER PETALS AFTER BEING WIDOWED IN 2013
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN CELEBRATING HOLI WITH COLOURS IN 2014
DR. PATHAK AND MRS. AMOLA PATHAK ENJOYING HOLI WITH THE WIDOWS
REVELRY UNLEASHED IN EVERY CORNER OF VRINDAVAN
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN CELEBRATING HOLI WITH COLOURS IN 2015
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN CELEBRATING HOLI IN 2016
ARE YOU HAPPY NOW, DEAR MOTHERS?
Like Holi, Raksha Bandhan is another of our attempts to bring the widows back to the mainstream, so that they do not feel isolated.

Raksha Bandhan, as Indians are familiar with, is beyond religion or rituals. It is the solemn promise of a brother to protect his sister or sisters all his life. The ‘rakhi’, usually a silk thread, symbolises that solemn promise and is tied by the woman to the wrist of her brother.

A group of widows from Varanasi and Vrindavan had the rarest experience of their life time this year, when they tied rakhi to their ‘bhai’ Hon’ble Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, at his residence, on the occasion of Raksha Bandhan.

Rajkuri from Sarnath widows’ ashram and Annapurna and Shakuntala of Nepali ashram from Varanasi carried 2,000 rakhis from other widows of Varanasi and Vrindavan, which they presented to the Hon’ble Prime Minister. Manu Ghosh, hailing from West Bengal, and Arati Mistry from Vrindavan met Shri Modi and tied the rakhis on behalf of their sister widows at his residence in the morning of the festival.

Shri Modi thanked the widows for tying the rakhis, and said that he had “a special bond with Varanasi, his Parliamentary constituency, which he represents in the Lok Sabha”. Interacting with the Nepali widows, the Prime Minister said he had “just returned after a tour of the Himalayan nation, where he visited the famous Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu.”

After actively participating in Holi in the past, the widows this time created history by tying ‘rakhi’ to children and sadhus in Vrindavan. They shared food with school children and upper caste sadhus and Brahmins on the occasion. The widows also participated in cultural programmes especially chalked out for the occasion.

Their lives have changed for beyond imagination after intervention of the Hon’ble Supreme Court and Sulabh International to take care of the widows waiting for death in despair in the last stages of their lives. Instead of fearing the dawn of another day, which earlier meant planning where to beg and what to eat, now each morning brings cheer. Instead of awaiting death, these women now want longer lives that will bring many more Holis, Diwalis, Durga Pujas and Rakhis.

Sulabh takes care of widows in Vrindavan, Varanasi and Kerdarnath. I observed that such an initiative will bring cheers to their lives. So, our idea was to change thoughts, behaviour and attitude of the people of this country towards widows of India, who are their mothers, sisters, aunties and so and so forth. This has not only worked beautifully, it is all there for everyone to see.
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN AND VARANASI TYING ‘RAKHI’ TO THE HON’BLE PRIME MINISTER, SHRI NARENDRA MODI,
ON THE OCCASION OF ‘RAKSHA BANDHAN’, AT NEW DELHI IN 2014
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN AND VARANASI TYING ‘RAKHI’ TO DR. BINDESHWAR PATHAK,
FOUNDER, SULABH SANITATION AND SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENT AT VRINDAVAN IN 2014
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN AND VARANASI TYING ‘RAKHI’ TO THE HON’BLE PRIME MINISTER,
SHRI NARENDRA MODI, ON THE OCCASION OF ‘RAKSHA BANDHAN’, AT NEW DELHI IN 2015
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN AND VARANASI TYING ‘RAKHI’ TO DR. PATHAK AT VRINDAVAN IN 2015
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN TYING ‘RAKHI’ TO THE HON’BLE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE,
ON THE OCCASION OF ‘RAKSHA BANDHAN’, AT NEW DELHI IN 2016
WIDOWS TYING ‘RAKHI’ TO DR. PATHAK AT VRINDAVAN IN 2016
It's all about fresh sweets and new saris
INSIDE GOPINATH TEMPLE, ONCE BANNED FROM ENTERING
The setting sun was sending its spectacular orange and yellow rays across the western skyline. An Air India plane was readying for takeoff on the tarmac of New Delhi’s IGI airport. Nothing out of the ordinary, would you say? You’d be right: this was a daily thing. Only, had you known that of the 180-odd fliers on that date, October 6, 2013, there were fifty Bengali widows from Vrindavan, flying to Kolkata to witness their very own festival of Durga Puja.

I was there with them along with some volunteers of Sulabh International and a good media contingent. This visit to Kolkata was happening for the widows after a lapse of several decades, may be the first after they were forced to leave home due to torture and humiliation. And that too, during the fabled Kolkata Durga Puja, which itself is now a major tourist draw.

To drive home the poignancy of the trip and show exactly how long it was before they had last seen their home state, here is an example: One hundred-and-seven year-old Lalita Adhikari belongs to Kolkata, but she does not remember when she had left that city. She has some vague memories of the place, like rusty images of packed trams, or the famous Howrah Bridge and Kalighat Mandir.

The Incredulous

When I had told the widows earlier that they would go to Kolkata by plane to witness the Durga Puja festival, most of them were incredulous. All sorts of fantasies played up in their minds as they had never imagined in their wildest dreams that they would travel by plane. They had till then watched the noisy aluminum ‘bird’ which looked very small from the ground. Many of these widows of Vrindavan had already forgotten even about their first train journey from Kolkata to Vrindavan several decades ago.

There was so much excitement on every widow’s face because for each of them, it was a rare and unique experience to fly high in the sky and watch the white post-monsoon clouds wafting like large pillows of soft cotton balls that seemed to engulf the plane from all sides. I suspect that some of them still had no clear idea what was in store for them.
Send off Advices

Earlier that morning at Vrindavan, they were given a hearty sendoff by their companions to Delhi. “Take good care of yourself, don’t move out alone; be always in company, and give us a phone call after reaching there”. These were some of the kind words and advices that moved their hearts. Most of the Vrindavan widows originally belong to West Bengal, and the visit for Puja festival had been their long-cherished desire. On their arrival at Sulabh Gram in New Delhi from Vrindavan, the widows were greeted by me and Sulabh workers amidst chanting of ‘Radhey-Radhey’, which reverberated in the air at regular intervals.

In the evening all of us reached the Delhi airport. Each one in the Sulabh team rendered all assistance to the Vrindavan guests to see to it that they boarded the plane safely. They anxiously waited for the plane, which they had never seen from such close quarters, let alone sit in one. Their simplicity and the excellent initiative taken by me were subjects of discussion in the media group accompanying the widows, who were traveling particularly to cover the event extensively.

The air hostesses of Air India welcomed the widows with folded hands and ushered them into their respective seats. After the two-hour thrilling journey, they reached Kolkata airport, where they were welcomed with flowers and garlands. It was mesmerisingly unfamiliar for these ladies, who had till then had only thrown flowers at the feet of Lord Krishna with tears of sorrow rolling down their cheeks.

The news of the arrival of the widows spread like wild fire in the entire city of Kolkata, which resulted in a huge presence of the media, which kept them engaged during the visit. The ladies had never seen so much attention being showered on them.

They were later taken to Barasat village in an air-conditioned bus, where a big crowd waited to receive them and receive their blessings… blessings from those who had been once condemned for life!
SPENDING HAPPIEST MOMENT IN AIRCRAFT
ARE ALL COMFORTABLE, MOTHERS
Ignominy to Glory

Durga Puja festival marks the victory of Goddess Durga over the evil buffalo-demon Mahishasura. The festival begins with the ceremonial descent of the Goddess from high heavens to visit her jubilant devotees. One can see everywhere beautifully decorated images of Goddess Durga in marquees (locally termed pandals) where the devotees offer pujas (prayers) and hold cultural events. The largest number of such pandals are seen in Kolkata, which literally becomes the World Capital of Durga Puja for four days, after which the Goddess returns to her consort, Lord Shiva up there in the Himalaya.

The widowed ladies, unmissable wonder, joy and happiness gracing their once forlorn faces, were first taken to Kumhar Toli on Baramali Street, where most of the Durga idols are created. It was the third day of Navratri. The artists were giving the finishing touches to the idols and were ready to transport them to various pandals which had ordered for them. The elderly ladies stood in prayers before Mother Durga’s idols.

Meanwhile, on the footpath of Kumhar Toli, when widows halted to have tea, they met 85-year-old widow Ashalata Das. She said she has four sons and all of them are useless, not doing anything. Ashalata herself had resorted to begging on the streets to feed herself. Manu Ghosh of the widows’ group said, “If someone brings her to Vrindavan, we will take care of her.” The once homeless had now the confidence of comforting one of their ilk in their own home!

Early on the morning of October 8, 2013, all the widow group members were taken to the Millennium Park, which skirts the Hooghly River, a promenade that has now become a popular visiting place for both tourists as well as tired Calcuttans. Our ladies
were on their way to Ramakrishna Mission Ashram at Belur Math. Ganesh Sarkar, Captain of the steamer ‘Matsyagandha’, and the crew set off up the Ganga River amidst chanting of ‘Radhey-Radhey’ by the ladies. The steamer was air-conditioned. The widows came to the upper deck and continued to recite bhajans. I also participated in the programme. The widows sang some devotional songs from Bollywood films too, apart from the traditional bhajans.

**Pathak Baba’s Home**

We were going against the current of the river. Some journalists from another steamer passing us by were taking photos of the widows. While we were passing under the cantilevered Howrah Bridge, a big crowd gathered up there and joyously echoed our ladies’ chant of ‘Radhey-Radhey’.

Meanwhile, I found Ashoka Dasi from the widows’ group in a pensive mood, gazing at the waters of the slow tide gracing the hull of the steamer. I felt I needed to know what exactly was going on in her mind, so I went up to her. She said: “In this very Kolkata, my son and his wife live. I have grandchildren as well.” When I asked if she would like to meet them, she admitted that the desire was indeed pricking her, although she had been trying hard to forget them. “It is seven years now since I started living in Vrindavan. I came to Kolkata thrice to meet them. But their behaviour forced me
to go back to Vrindavan again and again. The last time that I asked for his phone number, my son declined. If I had the number I could have called him and showed him how we are living and how Dr. Pathak Baba is supporting us like a real bhagwan (god),” she said.

Arrangements for breakfast had been made on the steamer itself. After reaching Belur Math, the ladies went around Ramakrishna Ashram and returned to Kolkata by the same steamer late that afternoon. In the evening, the widows were invited to Kolkata Lake View Kali Bari pandal. The programme was organised by the Times of India. The Hon’ble Chief Minister, Ms. Mamta Banerjee, was also invited there. Ms. Banerjee knew that the widows of Vrindavan were waiting for her at the pandal. Despite heavy rains, she reached there. She asked the ladies about their wellbeing. As Puja gifts, she gave them saris and congratulated me for the good work done by our organisation.

Durga Puja Frenzy

From there, we went to the famous Singhi Park Puja Pandal. It was evening time, and the frenzied crowd of visitors were milling on the streets. Traffic was snarling, moving at a snail’s pace, and it took two hours for us to reach Singhi Park.

The President of the Puja Samiti, Mr. Ashish Chandra, and its Chairman, Mr. Durga Prasad Mukherjee, welcomed the widows and me. The pandal here was constructed in the style of typical Vrindavan temples.

After darshan of Durga, everyone attended and enjoyed the cultural programme. Here everyone was eager to see Lalita Adhikari. At the age of 107, as she romped about on the streets of Kolkata with her walking stick; she had become the cynosure of all eyes. The Calcuttans already knew from newspaper and TV channel reports that 50 ladies from Vrindavan had come to their city to enjoy Durga Puja. People thronged to meet them and receive their blessings by touching their feet.

It was late evening when the ladies reached their hotel after a hectic day, for a well-deserved rest. They had packed in a lot at their age during a single day. But it seemed to me that with the booty of attention and honour they had received from Calcuttans and from the state chief minister Ms Mamata Banerjee, they were more elated than tired!

Day Three

On October 9, 2013, the party reached a beautiful pandal situated in the posh neighbourhood of Hindustan Park. The pandal there was crafted in the form of an old temple. Mr Ronu Banerjee and other artists had laboured for two months to build it. The ladies had the darshan of Mother Durga and sang some bhajans. For them, the day had special significance. We thereafter took them to the most famous sari shop
of Kolkata, Adi Bastralaya, in the upmarket Gariahat Bazaar. All of them purchased saris of their choice, a womanly delight they had not tasted in decades.

From there all of us reached Gopalpur’s (Lal Kothi) pandal. Proper seating arrangements had been made there for the widows. Mrs Manu Ghosh, ‘centurion’ Lalita Adhikari and I were invited up to the dais and from there we acknowledged the greetings from the crowd. Padmini Kolhapure, a popular actress of yesteryears, also came on the dais. She greeted us too. Later, after some more sightseeing, the ladies returned to the hotel quite late at night.

**Far Horizons: Ghetto to Taj Bengal**

October 10, 2013, was a day without much activity. Everyone put on their new saris for their visit to the British-era’s grand creation, the shining white-marbled Victoria Memorial, at the far end of the lush green Maidan, the ‘lung’ of Calcutta. At the memorial, Kolkata journalists barraged the ladies with questions and cameras went buzzing. The ladies enjoyed riding on the horse-drawn buggies that still retain of Kolkata of the ’Raj’ period and ply tourists around the Maidan. Later the ladies reached a pandal situated at Tollygunge, an aristocratic neighbourhood of the city. From there they reached the costliest hotel in Kolkata, Taj Bengal, by bus, where a programme of Bangla music had been organised for them. Chairs had been reserved for them in the hall. The programme lasted for almost an hour. After that they relished the traditional Bengali food at one of the plush restaurants of the jazzy hotel.

On October 11 and 12, the ladies visited Dakshineshwar Kali temple, a few pandals and met members of some voluntary organisations. The secretary of one such organisation, ‘Chhabi’, said, “It is our good fortune that you ladies have visited our institution. Not only I, but the whole of Kolkata welcomes you with great joy.” Arrangement for food for the widows had been made there.

When the ladies reached Charpolli Public Puja Samiti, Mr. Tihika Mandal, a former MLA, welcomed them. He said, “Every day, I read about them in newspapers and see them in TV channels. Today, we are lucky to meet them. We never knew that some organisation is working for the welfare of widows. I appreciate the efforts made by Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak.”

When we were leaving the pandal, many local people assembled to meet Manu Ghosh and Lalita Adhikari. They touched their feet, seeking their blessings. While coming out of the pandal, a lady requested both the mothers to visit her home, “even it be for a few moments”, she insisted. Both of them went with her and played with her son for a while. It was quite late in the night when they reached their hotel. They chanted ‘Radhey-Radhey’ for some time and then went off to bed.
Bidding goodbye to Kolkata on October 13, they took an Air India flight to Delhi. While coming to Kolkata, Lalita Adhikari could not properly see the plane by which she had come. Maybe because of her operated eyes and faint vision... 107 is a lot of years for those eyes! Manu Ghosh fulfilled her wish and showed her around the aircraft. She saw the plane parked on the runway. Most of the old ladies had by then learned how to utilise the services of air hostesses. This time, they themselves put on their seat belts. Those who could not took the help of the air hostesses.

What could one say of such a trip for the women who had been ousted from their very homes in the City of Joy, and pushed into a dreary ghetto of misery? They were mothers, all of them. And like Durga Maa, they visited their abode for four days. None of them desired to visit their original homes or their families, for the ‘family’ they now had, thanks to Sulabh International and me, was much more cherished than their old habitats of ignominy.
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN CELEBRATING
DURGA PUJA AT KOLKATA
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN ATTENDING THE DURGA PUJA IN PANDAL
ORGANISED BY BARASAT YOUTH LOVERS ASSOCIATION AT KOLKATA
PURCHASING SAREES IN FAMOUS SHOP AT KOLKATA
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN WITH DR. PATHAK AT HOWRAH BRIDGE, KOLKATA, A BIG CROWD GATHERED THERE ENJOYING THE ECHO OF ‘RADHEY-RADHEY’
THE GRAND SIGHT OF VICTORIA MEMORIAL, KOLKATA
AUDIENCE WITH HIS EXCELLENCY SHRI KESHARI NATH TRIPATHI, GOVERNOR OF WEST BENGAL AT GOVERNOR’S HOUSE AT KOLKATA ON SEPTEMBER 26, 2014
Shunned Widows Stun the Press

Before leaving Kolkata, though, a Press Conference had been organised by the Sulabh Hope Foundation in Oberoi Grand Hotel, Kolkata, an imposing but very sober Raj-time architectural jewel of Kolkata. The journalists asked me about the various humanitarian activities of Sulabh, which included adoption of widows not only of Vrindavan but also of Varanasi as well as of Deoli of Uttarakhand.

I said, the Supreme Court had enquired from the National Legal Service Authority if Sulabh could help the widows of Vrindavan. I said my mission was to restore their honour and dignity and fight the existing social prejudices against them. “They had been barred from attending any religious function. Even a dress code was thrust upon them. Breaking all those prejudices, these women have now come to witness the Durga Puja at Kolkata. We are happy to see that Calcuttans have welcomed them so heartily. We have been receiving phone calls from Puja Samitis and other voluntary organisations, who wanted to invite these mothers to their pandals and have a dialogue with them.”

I told the journalists that the media has a powerful role to play in projecting such issues and bring about a change in society.

Manu Maa: New Celebrity

Mrs Manu Ghosh, sitting on the dais with me, had impressed the journalists right from landing at the airport. She saluted the city of Kolkata and spoke about all the good works being done by Sulabh. “I had never thought even in my wildest dreams that I would one day sit in a plane and reach Kolkata. Fifty widows have come here and the credit goes to Sulabh; we are all happy with the kind of love you are showering on us,” she said. Asked by a journalist how she would celebrate the Dussehra, she asserted her dignity as a mainstream woman: “I will celebrate Dussehra in much the same way as you people will do.”
Manu Ghosh appeared in newspapers as well as news channels of Kolkata for her frank talk and cheerful demeanour. Whether it was at the press conference or at the Puja pandals, Manu Maa was the star attraction. Clad in a white sari, her personality was no less attractive. She hails from Kolkata and she does not want anyone to ask about her past days in the city.

“Let me enjoy my trip; I did not come here to recall my bad days. Yes, Kolkata looks very beautiful. We are now travelling with pomp and show. I never thought or even imagined we would do so,” said Manu.

Sometimes Manu took the camera from newsmen and took pictures of the streets of Kolkata. Photographers were told to click her pictures while having cold-drinks. “Don’t I look like a model,” she said with a coy giggle.

Manu can talk on any subject and answer questions correctly. Journalists frequented Hotel Sunrise, where Manu and Lalita Maa were staying. Sometimes her answers were bitter, but soft. Answering a question, she retorted: “Not only you but many people, even the Chief Minister, Smt. Mamata Banerjee, asked us if we are happy in Vrindavan. But you never came there to have a look at the conditions we were living at one time and how we live now, that’s why you don’t have the right to ask how we live there.”

**Point of No Return**

When many sons and daughters expressed their desire to take back their mothers with them, Lalita Maa lashed out: “We left our homes in helplessness. At that time, no one was there to help us. Now when we are into happy days, everyone is remembering us. I hate such hypocrisy.” At the Kolkata airport, she had even refused to meet her son.

But she was motherly with people who are not related to her: “Where do you live? Have you got married? How many members are there in your family? How is your wife?” she had asked reporters during a conversation. She frequently asked for tea. She talked of spirituality and sometimes, philosophy: “You can’t find God in the temples or books. God lives amongst us, someone who stands by in our grief and pain. Pathak Baba is God for us. He is doing a lot for us. Before he came to us, not a single woman in the five ashrams had any sense of spirituality. We were all concerned about just one thing: our daily bread. Today, we have overcome this problem. Now, we are enjoying our lives by singing Radhey-Radhey bhajans in the ashrams’.

A lady journalist asked me whether any of the ladies from among the widows would return to their homes in Kolkata. Instead of giving the reply myself I gave the mike to Manu Ghosh. She flatly declined to return to Kolkata, and asked the other ladies whether they would like to return to their homes. All of them said in unison, “No”!
When asked about some lasting memories of Kolkata, Manu Ghosh became emotional all of a sudden and said, “I have come to Kolkata only to see the things around. I have nothing to do with my memories of this place. Memories are there, but they only pinch and hurt.” Commenting on the statement, I said, “One can never forget his mother's food, his motherland and his mother tongue.”

After the media meet, I took them for lunch at a restaurant in the Grand, as it is popularly called. Everyone enjoyed the Bengali sweets and ice cream. The sky was overcast and the weather turned pleasant. Due to a few sharp showers, everyone had to stay at the hotel for quite some time.

**No, Thanks, Sulabh Is There!**

“Forgive me, Maa… I am here to take you home. Please come with me,” Sushant pleaded with his mother on her arrival at the Kolkata airport from Vrindavan. “What! Where were you all these years? Have you ever cared to even find out whether I am dead or alive? Get out from here. I do not want to see your face.” And then the angry mother broke down.

But the mother’s snub did not deter remorseful Sushant from his decision to bring her home. He traced her to Room No. 104 at the Sunrise Hotel, where she was lodged for the night, only to appear again with his wife Rinku before his mother the next morning for a fresh attempt to persuade her to come back home.

By this time, the mother had cooled down. Then followed a long chat with the son and daughter-in-law, but she refused to budge from her stand. “Don't worry about me. I am happy and fully protected by Sulabh and Krishna Bhagwan,” said the mother. And when they departed, the mother gave the couple some money as a token of love and blessings.

Right from the moment of landing of the Air India plane at Kolkata airport, there had been a stream of visitors to accord a hearty welcome to the Vrindavan widows. There were umpteen numbers of phone calls from relatives and friends asking them to visit their homes. Most of the people had known about their home-coming from the media.

Sapna Saha and Sunita Saha are sisters. They came all the way from Nutan Bazar in the hope that their mother Prachi Saha might also be one among the visiting widows from Vrindavan, and they were pleasantly surprised to see the beaming mother clad in a shining white sari coming up and greeting them. It was an emotion-loaded reunion. They were in tears when Sunita narrated how her mother ran away from the house following the cruel treatment meted out to her by her son, a drunkard.

Both the ladies requested their mother to come back and permanently stay with them, but she refused to do so and said, “I am perfectly happy under the care of Sulabh International at Vrindavan.”
DELECTABLE FOOD AFTER THE PRESS CONFERENCE
Diwali: Return to Mainstream

All the widows had retreated to their childhood, leaving their years far behind. Diwali was full of gaiety and the widows living in the ashram were participating merrily in the Diwali festival being celebrated by Sulabh International.

I addressed the widows and said, it was possibly the first occasion after Mahabharata, when ladies, widows in particular, were participating so freely and happily in the auspicious festival of Diwali.

Citing the name of Alexander, I said, “people pluck flowers they like, but they don’t do so with flowers in their own garden; rather, they protect and water the plants bearing flowers there. The widows of Vrindavan and Varanasi living in the ashrams are close to our hearts; we are trying to help them to be self-dependent and happy. Participating in such functions and festivals, they are trying to break the evil shackles society has forced upon them. Now they have been freely taking part in Holi, Diwali, Raksha Bandhan and Dussehra.

Widows, who have been abandoned by their families, held earthen oil lamps as they offered prayers on the banks of the River Yamuna as part of Diwali celebrations organized by Sulabh International in Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh.

These widows who live in various ashrams run by the district administration and NGO’s in Vrindavan celebrated Diwali and claimed to continue with the tradition, for the rest of their lives.

Local residents cheered the women on as they passed through the lanes and bylanes of the temple-filled town. The elderly women loudly chanted the tune of ‘Hare Krishna’ and later, they lit earthen lamps prepared and painted by them and offered prayers on
the river bank on the eve of Diwali.

In places like Varanasi and Vrindavan, hundreds of widows lead an isolated life to attain moksha or liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. Living in small rooms in narrow alleys, they spend most of their time praying and looking for food, in the absence of family support.

“We all were almost lost in the dark rooms of our ashrams since we realised that we are not inauspicious or a curse. It’s great to celebrate Diwali. I am now waiting for next year’s Diwali,” said 85-year-old Manu Ghosh, who came to the town after the death of her husband, leaving three sons behind, around three decades ago.

Almost 102-year-old Kanaklata, the oldest widow in Meera Sahbhagini Ashram of Vrindavan, who can only move about in a wheelchair, said that the lights, crackers and dancing reminded her of happier times with her family. But one day, everything went dark, and then she landed in Vrindavan. “I never thought that I too would be able to celebrate Diwali ever again in this life, after the death of my husband.”

With an aim to bring a ray of happiness in their twilight years, we came up with this unique idea to organise the festival of lights especially for the widows. I thought that, it was important to bring these widows, who are considered as inauspicious, back to mainstream life again.
NEVER DREAMT THEY HAD LIGHT FIRECRACKERS IN DIWALI
DIWALI IN 2015
Chhath: Sun Worship

Sun worship is common to most ancient religions of the world. In Egypt, the Sun God Ra was worshipped. As a mighty visible force of nature, the Sun has been accepted as an entity revered and granted the stature of divinity. In India too, particularly Bihar, eastern UP, Jharkhand and parts of Nepal, Chhath Puja (falling on the sixth day of the Indian month of Kartik i.e. October and November), is observed with sincere devotion.

Chhath Puja has been a regular function in my family and as in earlier days, is celebrated at my residence in Hauz Khas with fasting and all the rituals. The lawns of my bungalow are decorated with flowers and banana trunks, and devotional songs and music are played. Mrs. Amola Pathak, my wife, began the rituals after a bath and a vegetarian meal of rice, pumpkin, bitter gourd, milk etc. (Kharna). All those present were offered prasad.

The next day, after observing fast and performing Puja for the whole day Mrs. Pathak took the ritual dip in the water body arranged in the lawn helped by her daughter, son, daughter-in-law and of course me. Standing in the water up to her knees, she made offerings or arghya to the setting Sun in the west. Pundits recited shlokas (verses) from Aditya Stotra, eulogising the Sun God. All the members of the Sulabh family including functionaries, workers, liberated scavenger women and widows of Vrindavan, participated. The next day, the rising Sun was worshipped again with arghya after bath and prayers. After the worship, Mrs. Pathak applied vermilion in the parted hair of married women and on the foreheads of men. Prasad was distributed thereafter to one and all present on the occasion.

Widows of Vrindavan and Varanasi have been participating in Chhath Puja celebrations at our home for the past three years.
MRS PATHAK AT THE ‘GHAT’ FOR CHHATH PUJA
Liberation at Ujjain Kumbh

The Ujjain Kumbh Mela in 2016 brought together faith and inclusivity as the widows from Vrindavan, Varanasi, dalits and marginalised women took holy dips and were greeted with warmth.

The Ujjain Kumbh Mela, one of the four fairs traditionally recognised as Kumbh Mela by Hindus in India, is a mass pilgrimage in which devotees gather to bathe in a sacred river. It is the world's largest religious gathering.

Hindus believe that a dip in the holy water of Ganga cleanses them of all their sins and paves the way to salvation. According to Hindu mythology, drops of amrita (nectar of immortality) fell at four places while Lord Vishnu was transporting it away from the demons. The amrit was in a Kumbh, or earthen pot. These four places, including Ujjain, are the sites of Kumbh melas.

This year, on the occasion, women from Alwar and Tonk districts of Rajasthan, belonging to a caste whose members performed manual scavenging in the past, took a holy bath at the famous Ramghat. The dalits, who were earlier known as ‘untouchable scavengers’, as well as the widows from Vrindavan and Varanasi also took the holy bath at the sacred ghat (stairs leading to the sacred river) of Kshipra. Widows and dalits are not generally allowed to perform most Hindu rituals, let alone the Kumbh dip, but this year, when the group emerged from their holy bath, priests belonging to the highest Hindu caste welcomed them to mainstream society by blowing conches, chanting hymns, smearing holy ash on their foreheads and declaring that they were no longer inauspicious or ‘untouchable’.

It’s the biggest sign yet of changing attitudes towards India’s outdated caste system. This Kumbh ceremony should be viewed as a bold and successful step towards the egalitarian inclusion of the downtrodden in the religion-social world of the Hindus and the historical importance of the high caste Brahmins supporting the women in particular.
A MOMENT OF FAITH AND INCLUSION ON THE GHATS OF KSHIPRA, UJJAIN

This path-breaking initiative of taking the dalits, widows from Vrindavan and Varanasi for a dip in the Holy water of the Kshipra River during the “Simhastha Kumbh” at Ujjain, was taken by Dr. Pathak, as a step towards egalitarian inclusion of the downtrodden in the religion-social mainstream of Hindu world.
Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, Founder of Sulabh International, offered prayers at the divine Mahakaleshwar Jyotirlingam Mandir along with the erstwhile untouchables women scavengers from Alwar and Tonk (Rajasthan) and the widows from Vrindavan and Varanasi.
Spiritual Guru Shri Awadheshanand Giri ji Maharaj blessed the widows from Vrindavan and Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh) and liberated untouchables women scavengers from Alwar, Tonk (Rajasthan) at Ujjain.

COMMON DINING: Dr. Pathak and Hindu Priests, dining with the liberated untouchables women scavengers from Alwar, Tonk (Rajasthan) and widows from Vrindavan and Varanasi.
Nepali Mandir: Varanasi Widows

While the Supreme Court of India first enabled Sulabh to work with the widows of Vrindavan, Sulabh has subsequently also adopted the widows of Varanasi. We have identified 150 widows, who are given financial help of Rs 2,000 per month, and thus launched our second campaign against the age-old stigma of ‘widowhood’. Sulabh took initiative whole-heartedly to take care of their basic needs. Sulabh has made a significant contribution in creating awareness among the people by probing and highlighting the problems of poor widows living in deplorable conditions in Varanasi.

Jamuna Devi became a bride at the age of 9 and a widow at 18. Now in her 80s, she has spent the last 60 years of her life by the banks of River Ganga in Varanasi, the ancient seat of Hinduism in Uttar Pradesh. Ratna Devi, her younger sister, has also been with her for many years now. She is unable to recall the journey from her village in Nepal to the holy city after she was deserted by her husband, who took a second wife.

The sisters have worn white saris – a symbol of widowhood among conservative Hindus – ever since they can remember, and live with twenty other Nepali women in a ramshackle house, appropriately called Nepali Mandir, located in a congested Varanasi neighbourhood. They pray all day, sing bhajans (hymns) and live off the food and alms given by visiting pilgrims. Their sole ambition is to die on the banks of the holy river. Such a death, they believe, will cleanse their souls of the sins of their past lives and assure them an entry into heaven. Sadly, Jamuna and Ratna are among the hundreds of widows in Varanasi and towns like Vrindavan and Mathura, for whom death seems to be the only way out of a lifetime of sorrow and crushing poverty.

For centuries, the narrow bylanes of the city have been home to widows, many of whom hail from the eastern state of West Bengal. Shunned by their families, they mostly seek refuge either in homes supported by poorly-funded civil society
organisations or at the ghats thronging with pilgrims all the year round, while others survive by begging on the streets.

Now it’s the turn of widows to get their due in society. Of course, Jamuna Devi and her friends at Nepali Mandir are not sure why they are suddenly getting so much attention. Just the other day, informs Jamuna, their third floor house had ‘visitors’, who offered to pay them a monthly pension of Rs 2000. Moreover, they were also invited to the Ganga ghat for a special prayer meeting.

Jamuna made it to that meeting. Bent with age and with a tonsured head, her deeply wrinkled face betraying a lifetime of struggle, she looked up as I spoke and quickly identified me as one of those visitors who had come to her home.

For me, the cause of the widows was a top priority. Over the last few months, Sulabh has made available two ambulances for the widows of Varanasi, in addition to the monthly pensions. They were also given different skills training.

When my volunteers and I visited the ashram, it brought some cheer into the lives of those otherwise forgotten women. It was a joyful moment, as they sang folk songs in Bhojpuri. One elderly inmate even broke into a dance. I was overjoyed by seeing them so spontaneously happy!
AFTER VRINDAVAN DR. PATHAK MEETING WITH THE WIDOWS OF VARANASI IN THEIR ASHRAMS AT VARANASI, UTTAR PRADESH
DR. PATHAK ADOPTED WIDOWS OF VARANASI AFTER VRINDAVAN
DR. PATHAK DISTRIBUTING SAREES TO WIDOWS OF VARANASI
WIDOWS OF VARANASI SINGING BHAJANS AND KIRTANS WITH DR. PATHAK
AFTER VRINDAVAN DR. PATHAK MEET WITH THE WIDOWS OF VARANASI IN THEIR ASHRAMS AT VARANASI, UTTAR PRADESH
Hon'ble Shri Pranjal Yadav, District Magistrate, Varanasi, is releasing a book on the Widows of Varanasi on Way to New Life.

Hon'ble Shri Pranjal Yadav, District Magistrate, flagging off an ambulance for the widows of Varanasi.
WIDOWS OF VARANASI CELEBRATING RAKSHA BANDHAN AT VARANASI
INAUGURATION OF THE TRAINING CENTRE FOR THE WIDOWS OF VARANASI AT
RAJKIYA MAHILA VRIDHASHRAM, DURGAKUND, VARANASI ON MAY 26, 2013
WIDOWS OF VARANASI CELEBRATING HOLI FESTIVAL
DR. PATHAK HOSTED THE DINNER FOR WIDOWS OF VARANASI AT DEVANG HOUSE, ASHOKA HOTEL, NEW DELHI ON APRIL 5, 2016
Widows of Varanasi thanks to Dr. Pathak for given us opportunity to have dinner in five star hotel.
Handling a Himalayan Tragedy

The 2013 monsoon was terrible for the people of Uttarakhand, especially for those residing in the Garhwal region’s Deoli village. The six-odd hamlets that comprise the Deoli-Bhanigram panchayat were ruined by the heavy rains.

Fifty-seven men – temple priests at the Kedarnath shrines, restaurant owners, photographers and guides – were washed away by the flash floods on the night of June 17, 2013. All 57 have since been declared dead by the state government.

Deoli village is now known as village of widows. Most of the families here have little money and resources to run their households as their demised husbands were the main source of income.

Moved by the natural disaster that struck Uttarakhand and left many villagers and pilgrims homeless, Sulabh has extended a helping hand to women who had been widowed and others by giving financial help of Rs 2000/- per month. While this goes to women and elderly members of the family, another Rs 1000/- is paid to each child, covering 155 devastated residents of six villages of Deoli-Bhanigram Panchayat. Sulabh has further decided to give Rs 1000/- per month to 300 more families of these villages.

Vocational training centre for Uttarakhand’s widows

Sulabh International Social Service Organisation has imparted vocational training programmes in Deoli-Bhanigram village of Kedar valley apart from financial support being given to the homeless families and those without livelihoods.

Deoli-Bhanigram gram sabha lost lives when a glacial lake burst and flooded the valley. Now, in order to build livelihoods and make the families self-sufficient, I decided to start vocational training programmes for residents of the village located in Guptkashi.
The training programme is being supervised by me along with a team of experts who train people in relevant skills suitable to their abilities and allow them to earn their living.

A vocational training programme was also launched for the women and widows for imparting training in candle making, sewing, making diya-bati (lamps and incense sticks) and providing basic education. The centre has been provided with twelve computers, twenty-five sewing machines along with other equipment, and materials for imparting training. The centre is imparting training to women and others in eight trades i.e. tailoring, knitting, machine-embroidery, computer education, shorthand and typing, candle-making, aggarbati-making (incense sticks), batti (cotton) making and paper plate and dona making. The centre is also providing basic education to trainees, besides making them computer literate.

The main motto of Sulabh is to provide vocational training to women and others in these villages, so that they can acquire necessary skills to earn a living. They are trained without taking any fee. Raw materials needed for making these products, like wax, thread, gas, oil, pen, pencil, paper, cotton, books, CD, cartage, stationery, ribbon etc. are provided free of cost.

Sulabh imparts training to them with a view to providing an alternative source of income and rehabilitating them by enabling them to be self-employed in different trades. The centre also organises awareness programmes from time to time to boost their confidence levels.

My idea was to reach out to these women who by a quirk of fate and misfortune had become widows in a devastating natural calamity. They were on the brink of hopelessness and I tried to bring a ray of hope at the end of their dark tunnel of despair.
DELUGE IN KEDARNATH IN JUNE 2013
DR. PATHAK LISTENING TO THE HEART-RENDING STORIES OF WIDOWS OF UTTARAKHAND WHO HAD LOST THEIR HUSBANDS DURING THE DEVASTATING FLOODS THAT ENGULFED KEDARNATH. NOT ONLY THEY HAD LOST THEIR HUSBANDS, BUT THEY WERE ALSO TRAUMATIZED BY THE FACT THEY HAD NO FOOD TO EAT AND NO RESOURCES LEFT FOR THEIR CHILDREN’S EDUCATION.
SULABH HAS SET UP A VOCATIONAL TRAINING CENTRE FOR LIVELIHOOD OF WIDOWS FOR MAKING THEM SELF-RELIANT AT UTTARAKHAND
BABY SUKANYA, BARELY TWO MONTHS OLD LOST HER FATHER IN KEDARNATH’S DEVASTATING FLOODS. SHE IS SEEN IN THE LAP OF DR. BINDESHWAR PATHAK, WHO HAS ENSURED LIFETIME CARE AND UPBRINGING.
My dear Sukanya,

Ever since I have seen you, you have been on my mind and I have been constantly thinking of you. I still vividly remember that day, 12th December, 2013, you were crying in the lap of your mother, but the moment your mother gave you in my arms and kept you in my lap you immediately started smiling – a smile I will never forget.
You were staring at my eyes and slowly and slowly started opening your mouth, moving your lips just like a lotus flower. Although no words were spoken between us, your beautiful and heartwarming smile said everything to me.

I believe in ‘Him’. Whatever ‘He’ will provide for you I will pass on to you. It is ‘He’ who will help you for your education, provide comfortable living and a good house to live in as well as marriage and other requirements.

You, Sukanya, are just like my grand-daughter and with ‘His’ blessings I will try to care for you, nourish you as well as cherish you in the best possible manner.

Now, because of you, I will take care of your village also, so that you can grow-up in a healthy and loving environment with good friendly neighbours.

I will also write and talk to you about philosophical and spiritual knowledge apart from other subjects to make you a complete human being who will see a happier and better world irrespective of religion, caste, creed etc.

I am sending you some gifts like toys, sweets, jhoola, clothes etc with Ms. Vinita and Mr. Madan Jha to be delivered to your mother. Your mother will give you these things as per your requirement. From time to time I will be sending these things to you.

I would have come myself but, my prior engagements didn’t permit me.

With good luck and best wishes.

Baby Sukanya
D/o Dhanita Devi
C/o Sunil Kumar, Gram – Sirwani
Deoli Bhanigram – 246 439
Uttarakhand

Yours lovingly,
Baba
(Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak)
Dr. Pathak showing the photographs of the tragic incident that devastated the lives of widows of Uttarakhand

Dr. Pathak organised community lunch for widows and others at Deoli-Bhanigram village, Uttarakhand
Dr. Pathak Praying for a Better Tomorrow
Celebrating Christmas

Pictorial Vignettes of the Widows of Vrindavan and Varanasi
HON’BLE SUPREME COURT’S INTERVENTION CHANGED THE LIVES AND DESTINY OF THE WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN. THEY CAME TO SEE AND PAY RESPECT TO THE GREAT INSTITUTION
SYMBOLS OF FREEDOM
RAJPATH: A JOYOUS MARCH TO RASHTRAPATI BHAVAN
AMIDST BLOOMING FLOWERS IN THE MUGHAL GARDEN AT RASHTRAPATI BHAWAN
The Taj Mahal had special visitors — widows from Vrindavan and Varanasi on the occasion of International Women’s Day.

As the women, dressed in white sarees, walked on the red sandstone pathways in twos and threes, foreign tourists stopped and got themselves photographed with them.

The visit on the International Women’s Day was sponsored by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). The widows, who live in shelter homes run by Sulabh International, visited Agra Fort as well and were accorded a reception.

“I am humbled to have welcomed these women neglected by society,” said N K Pathak, ASI Chief in Agra.

“They were indeed our special guests today on the International Women’s Day. Surely this is a much better way to celebrate the occasion than holding unproductive lectures in five-star hotels,” he said.

Chitra Lekha from Varanasi told IANS that it was her dream to see the Taj Mahal but she never got the opportunity.

Most widows who came for the visit were above 60 years, even 70.

“We are now well looked after by Sulabh Baba (Bindeshwari Pathak)… Earlier we got only Rs. 8 a day for chanting bhajans at various ashrams. But now we get Rs. 2000 a month and also medical facilities arranged by the Sulabh,” said Kamla Dasi.
THE WIDOWS VISITING THE OFFICE OF INDIAN WOMEN’S PRESS CORPS AT NEW DELHI ON DECEMBER 7, 2013

WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN AND VARANASI ATTENDING THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF SOCIOLOGY OF SANITATION AT NEW DELHI ON JANUARY 10, 2014
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN PARTICIPATING IN WORLD TOILET DAY AT NEW DELHI ON NOVEMBER 18-19, 2014

Hon’ble Smt. Smriti Irani, the then Union Minister of Human Resource Development, (now Union Minister of Textiles) with Smt. Manu Ghosh, a Vrindavan widow and others
INTERNATIONAL WIDOWS’ DAY
(DECLARED BY THE UNITED NATIONS)
INTERNATIONAL WIDOWS’ DAY
(DECLARED BY THE UNITED NATIONS)
THE WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN BEING BLESSED BY THE HON’BLE CHIEF MINISTER OF UTTAR PRADESH SHRI AKHILESH YADAV DURING THE INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION OF AGRICULTURE AND HORTICULTURE TECHNOLOGY, ORGANIZED BY THE UTTAR PRADESH GOVERNMENT, DURING JANUARY 22-24, 2016
WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN ENJOYING WITH INTERNATIONAL VISITORS
INTERACTION OF WIDOWS WITH EMINENT PERSONALITIES AT SULABH CAMPUS

Hon’ble Shri Justice Sudhanshu Jyoti Mukhopadhaya, Hon’ble Supreme Court of India, accepting the bouquets from the Widows of Vrindavan and Varanasi, during his visit at Sulabh campus on May 27, 2014

Hon’ble Shri Thaawar Chand Gehlot, Union Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment, with the widows of Vrindavan, during his visit at Sulabh campus on January 5, 2015
Hon'ble Mr. Phil Scanlan, Chairman, New York Global Leaders Dialogue Harvard Club, USA and Hon'ble Ms. Pam Kwatra, Executive Board Member, New York Global Leader Dialogue @ Harvard Club, USA, interacting with the widows of Vrindavan, during their visit at Sulabh campus on October 11, 2015
His Excellency Mr. Vladimir Maric, Ambassador of the Republic of Serbia to India, His Excellency Dr. Sabit Subasic, Bosnia and Herzegovina Ambassador to India, His Excellency Mr. Georges de La Roche Du Ronzet, Ambassador of the Republic of Guatemala to India and His Excellency Mr. Andrés Barbé Gonzales, Ambassador of the Republic of Chile to India, with the Widows of Vrindavan, during their visit at Sulabh campus on October 27, 2015

Hon'ble Shri Haribhai Parathibhai Chaudhary, the then Minister of State for Home Affairs, Government of India, along with Hon'ble Shri Chunibhai Kanjibhai Gohel, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), Hon'ble Dr. Kirit Premjibhai Solanki, Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha), Hon'ble Shri Dilipbhai Pandya, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) and Hon'ble Shri Shankarbhai N. Vegad, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), accepting the bouquets from widows of Vrindavan, during their visit at Sulabh campus on December 7, 2015
Hon'ble Smt. Rita Bahuguna Joshi, National Spokesperson-Indian National Congress (INC), MLA from Cantt. Lucknow, former President Uttar Pradesh Congress Committee, interacting with the widows of Vrindavan, during her visit at Sulabh campus on December 30, 2015

Hon'ble Dr. Srihari Pratap Shahi, Municipal Commissioner, Varanasi Nagar Nigam, Varanasi, with the Widows of Vrindavan and Varanasi, during his visit at Sulabh campus on January 6, 2016
His Excellency Mr. Bothata Tsikoane, High Commissioner of the Kingdom of Lesotho, His Excellency Daniel P. Othol, Ambassador of the Republic of South Sudan to India, His Excellency Mr. Ernest Rwanucyo, High Commissioner for Rwanda to India, His Excellency Mr. Andra Sanra, Ambassador of the Republic of Benin to India and His Excellency Mr. Alam Tsehay Woldemariam, Ambassador of the State of Eritrea to India with the Widows of Vrindavan, during their visit at Sulabh campus on January 18, 2016

His Excellency Mr. Alexandre Cécé Loua, Ambassador of the Republic of Guinea interacting with the widows of Vrindavan, during his visit at Sulabh campus on January 19, 2016
Smt. Manu Ghosh, a widow of Vrindavan, welcoming the Ambassador of Nepal His Excellency Shri Deep Kumar Upadhyay, by applying the traditional vermilion ‘Tilak’ on his forehead, during his visit at Sulabh campus on January 20, 2016

Hon’ble Dr. Poonam Khetrapal Singh, WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia, with the widows of Vrindavan and Varanasi, during her visit at Sulabh campus on March 9, 2016
Hon’ble Shri P. Chidambaram, former Union Finance Minister and Senior Congress Leader, with the widows of Vrindavan, during his visit at Sulabh campus on April 4, 2016

Dr. Pathak explaining the conditions of widows in Vrindavan to Hon’ble Shri Upendra Kushwaha, Minister of State for Human Resource Development, Government of India, and National President of Rashtriya Lok Samata Party, during his visit at Sulabh campus on March 17, 2016
Hon'ble Shri Siddh Nath Singh, General Manager (Corporate-CSR), Coal India Limited, with the Widows of Vrindavan and Varanasi, during his visit at Sulabh campus on April 13, 2016

Hon'ble Shri Alok Rawat, IAS (Retd.), Member, National Commission for Women, New Delhi, interacting with the Widows of Vrindavan and Varanasi, during his visit at Sulabh campus on April 13, 2016
Hon'ble Ms. Pankhuri Gidwani, Miss India 2016, (2nd Runner-up) spending some happy moments with the Widows of Vrindavan and Varanasi, during her visit at Sulabh campus on April 23, 2016

His Excellency Mr. Alphonsus H.M. Stoelinga, Ambassador of the Netherlands to India, Bhutan and Nepal, with the widows of Vrindavan, during his visit at Sulabh campus on July 12, 2016
Hon'ble Shri Rabindra Kumar Jena, Member of Parliament, Lok Sabha, Odisha, with the Widows of Vrindavan, during his visit at Sulabh campus on July 28, 2016

Hon'ble Shri Tempa Tsering, Representative of His Holiness Dalai Lama in New Delhi and Hon'ble Professor Amitabh Kundu, Visiting Professor, Institute for Human Development and Senior Fellow, Delhi Policy Group, interacting with the Widows of Vrindavan, during their visit at Sulabh campus on August 2, 2016
Hon'ble Professor Amitabh Kundu, Visiting Professor, Institute for Human Development and Senior Fellow, Delhi Policy Group, interacting with the Widows of Vrindavan, during his visit at Sulabh campus on August 2, 2016

Hon'ble Shri Tarun Vijay, Philosopher, Thinker, Senior Journalist and former Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), interacting with the Widows of Vrindavan, during his visit at Sulabh campus on August 6, 2016
Hon'ble Dr. Sachchidanand Joshi, Member Secretary of Indira Gandhi, National Centre for the Arts, Ministry of Culture, Government of India, interacting with the Widows of Vrindavan, during his visit at Sulabh campus on August 6, 2016

Dr. Pathak explaining the conditions of widows in Vrindavan to Hon'ble Shri Satyapal Singh, Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha), Sambhal, Uttar Pradesh, during his visit at Sulabh campus on August 11, 2016
Hon’ble Shri Manoj Tiwari, Member of Parliament, Lok Sabha, accepting bouquets from Widows of Vrindavan, during his visit at Sulabh campus on September 6, 2016

Hon’ble Shri Ramesh Chandappa Jigajinagi, Minister of State for Drinking Water & Sanitation, Government of India, with the bouquets from the Widows of Vrindavan, during his visit at Sulabh campus on September 27, 2016
Attending the Vivekanand Seva Samman 2015, organised by Shree Burrabazar Kumarsabha Pustakalaya, Kolkata, Oswal Bhawan, 2B, Nando Mullick Lane, Kolkata, on February 1, 2015

Attending the Sardar Patel Award 2014, organised by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Award Foundation, at Bhartiya Vidya Bhawan, Kasturba Gandhi Marg, New Delhi, on February 9, 2015
Attending the Special Lecture on Role of NGO's in Social Accommodation of Widows, organised by Banaras Hindu University, at Varanasi, on September 4, 2015

Attending the Yoga Diwas at Mathura, on September 24, 2015

Attending the 46th Sarvodaya Samaj Sammelan, Delhi, organised by Sarvodaya Samaj Sammelan Mahadevbhai Bhavan, Sevagram, Wardha, at Gandhi Ashram Harijan Sevak Sangh, Kings Way Camp, New Delhi on October 1, 2015
Attending the Blood Donation Camp, organised by Bondhu Mahal's Blood Donation Camp, on January 23, 2016

Attending the Nagrik-Samman-Samaroh, organised by Nagrik Munch, New Delhi on July 29, 2016
Attending the Three-day meet to deliberate on current issues, organised by Press Trust of India (PTI), Patna, at Hotel Maurya, Patna on August 26, 2016

Having dinner at Hotel Maurya, Patna on August 26, 2016
Attending the programme at Ruby Crystal Hall, Yo-China, Bander-Bagicha, Patna, organised by Lions Club of Parliputra Greater Seva on August 27, 2016

Attending the book release function at Pragati Maidan, New Delhi, organised by Diamond Books on August 28, 2016
Dr. Pathak organised a dinner for widows in Hotel Ashoka, after attended the First National Conference, organised by Deshkal Society, at India International Centre, Lodhi Estate, New Delhi on September 2, 2016

I am happy and I am proud.
Why should I be ashamed?
My smile is full of wisdom and serenity.
I am a woman. I am your mother, sister, and daughter…
I gave birth, and love, and life.
I gave blood, and sweat, and tears,
With such a long patience…
But you gave me back contempt, and exclusion.
Do not worry.
You are not true, you are not sincere, you are wrong.
But I do not care and I love you.

I am a woman and I am a widow.
I loved so much my husband.
He passed and… I became what?
Untouchable? Scavenger? A shame for society?
Tell me… Sincerely… Who should be ashamed?
Did I steal? Did I kill? Did I rape?

It is so easy to put me down.
This is what YOU think,
Because I look so fragile.
You think that you can easily ignore me,
Crush me between your fingers.

But God is Love and I am a servant of Love,
A Lover of Goodness, Beauty, Justice and Truth.
I believe in Sulabh, and I trust Dr. Pathak:
I believe in peaceful and deep social revolution
Giving birth to a fair society
Where I shall be a princess in your dreams…
And no more a nightmare and a ghost in your unfair reality!

Please, please, can you only… RESPECT ME?
I am just like you: I am free!
And my name is Beauty, Shanti, Felicity.
This is Holi and…
I am Victory of Simplicity.

by Xavier Zimbardo
“A widow faces the combined onslaught of superstition, stigma, patriarchal misogyny, vicious cruelty and blatant discrimination. Even her own family members conspire with the society in condemning her to lead a horrible and hellish life. This became painfully clear when I talked to them, heard them empathetically, and saw their heart-wrenching plight. This left me with no option other than helping them and organizing a sustained campaign for their material and social salvation.”

“The Sulabh initiative for widows is meant to emancipate them from all kinds of deprivations, restrictions and humiliations. All right-thinking people must come together to lend our widowed sisters and mothers a healing and helping hand.”

“Widows are human beings like we are, they have equal dignity and rights as all of us have, but due to social callousness and cruelty they are turned into a living corpse. It is our social and moral obligation to help them lead a normal, happy and productive life.”
DRAFT OF PROPOSED BILL FOR THE PROTECTION, WELFARE AND MAINTENANCE OF WIDOWS

During my work I came across a proposed Bill made by Prof. Mahadeorao Shiwankar, M.P. in 2007 which to my great surprise contained a number of beneficial clauses on exactly the same lines which I am working and helping the widows of Vrindavan. After going through the Bill and keeping in mind my experiences in the field, I am proposing certain modifications in the Bill of Prof. Mahadeorao Shiwankar, M.P. which I am enumerating in bold letters. I am annexing my Draft Bill as well as the Bill No. 12 of 2007 of Prof. Mahadeorao Shiwankar, M.P.

By

Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, Ph.D., D.Litt.
Sociologist & Social Reformer Founder,
Sulabh Sanitation Movement
A bill to provide for the measures to be undertaken by the State for the protection, welfare and maintenance of neglected, abandoned and destitute widows by establishing a Welfare Board for such widows and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.

Be it enacted by Parliament in the Sixty-third Year of the Republic of India as follows:—

1. (1) This Act may be called the Protection, Welfare and Maintenance of Widows Act, 2013. Short title and extent.

(2) It extends to the whole of India.

2. In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires,— Definitions

(a) “abandoned widow” means a widow who has been deserted or thrown out of the household by her relatives to fend for herself and who has no means to support her and her dependent children, if any;

(b) “appropriate Government” means in the case of a State the Government of that State and in other cases the Central Government;

(c) “Board” means the National Widows Welfare Board established under Section 3;

(d) “destitute widow” means a widow stricken with infirmity due to old age, physical disability, chronic ailment, mental imbalance or who has no source of income to support herself and her dependent children, if any;
(e) “prescribed” means prescribed by rules made under this Act; and

(f) “widow” means a woman whose husband has expired after her legal marriage.

Establishment of the National Widows Welfare Board.

3. (1) The Central Government shall, by notification in the Official Gazette, establish a Board to be called the National Widows Welfare Board for the purposes of this Act.

(2) The Board shall be a body corporate by the name aforesaid having perpetual succession and a common seal with power to acquire, hold and dispose of property, both movable and immovable and to contract and shall by the said name sue and be sued.

(3) The Head Office of the Board shall be situated at such place as may be decided by the Central Government and the Board may establish its branches in the States and Union territories in such manner as may be prescribed.

(4) The Board shall consist of,—

(a) a chairperson ex-officio who shall be the Minister in charge of the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment;

(b) a vice-chairperson preferably a widow to be appointed by the Central Government;

(c) three members of Parliament of whom two shall be from Lok Sabha and one from the Rajya Sabha to be nominated by the presiding officers of respective Houses;
(d) two members representing the Union Ministry dealing with the administration of this Act to be appointed by the Central Government;

(e) not more than four members to be appointed by the Central Government in consultation with the Governments of States, by rotation in alphabetical order, to represent the Governments of the States; and

(f) three members to be appointed by the Central Government from amongst the Non-Governmental Organizations working for the welfare of widows.

(5) The Board shall follow such procedure in discharge of its agenda and hold meetings in such manner as may be prescribed.

(6) The Salary, allowances and other conditions of service of the Vice-chairperson and other members of the Board shall be such as may be prescribed.

(7) The Board shall have a Secretariat with such number of officers and employees with such terms and conditions of service, as may be necessary for the efficient functioning of the Board as may be prescribed.

4. (1) The Central Government shall set up a fund to be known as the Widows Welfare Fund.

(2) The Central Government and the State Governments shall contribute to the Fund in such ratio as may be prescribed.
(3) There shall also be credited to the Fund such other sums as may be received by way of donation, contribution, assistance or otherwise by the Board.

5. (1) The Board shall promote and provide, by such measures as it thinks fit for the protection, maintenance and welfare of neglected, abandoned and destitute widows and for their dependent children.

(2) Without prejudice to the generality of the provisions of sub-section (1), the Board shall,—

(a) maintain district-wise register of widows with such particulars and in such manner as may be prescribed;

(b) collect and get verified the antecedents of every widow covered under this Act to assess her need for assistance in such manner as may be prescribed.

(c) perform such other functions as may be assigned to it from time to time.

6. The Board shall provide to the abandoned or destitute widows, on an application prescribed for the purpose, the following facilities, namely:—

(a) Subsistence allowance of rupees two thousand per month to be revised from time to time as per the price index.
(b) residential accommodation free of cost wherever necessary;

(c) free education including technical education to the dependent children of the widows;

(d) gainful employment;

(e) vocational training wherever required;

(f) medical facilities as available to the government servants.

(g) such other facilities as may be necessary and as may be prescribed:

Provided that if a widow covered under this Act gets gainful employment or remarries, the facilities provided to her under this Act shall stand withdrawn from the date such widow gets employment or remarries, as the case may be:

Provided further that a widow residing with her in-laws or parents according to custom or due to other circumstances shall not be denied the facilities under this Act on this ground.

7. Notwithstanding anything contained in any other law for the time being in force or in any custom, a widow,—

(i) shall not be evicted or thrown out of the house of the in-laws or parents, as the case may be, where such widow was residing at the time of death of her husband;
(ii) shall be entitled to inherit the property or the share of her late husband in case of joint ownership of the property from her in-laws; and

(iii) shall be entitled for maintenance from the heir or in-laws who abandon a widow for subsistence.

8. The Central Government shall, after due appropriation made by Parliament in this behalf by law, provide adequate requisite funds for carrying out the purposes of this Act.

9. The provisions of this Act and rules made thereunder shall have effect notwithstanding anything inconsistent therewith contained in any other law for the time being in force, but save as aforesaid the provisions of this Act shall be in addition to and not in derogation of any other law for the time being applicable to the widows.

10. The Central Government may, by notification in the Official Gazette, make rules for carrying out the purposes of this Act.
STATEMENT OF OBJECTS AND REASONS

In our country, there are millions of unfortunate women who lose their husbands untimely, and become widows. Their number is nearly three per cent. of total population. More than fifty per cent of these widows are old, infirm, disabled and have no source of income or livelihood. Their position becomes miserable if they have dependent children to support and bring up. They work as housemaids and take up other jobs for survival.

It commonly occurs that when a widow does not have any permanent source of income or livelihood, she is driven out of her in-laws' home or even from her parental home. Sometimes condition of such widows become miserable and their problems increase manifold due to poverty and other compelling reasons. Many such widows can be seen begging in the streets and public places. Several women who becomes widows in their youth are not only sexually exploited by their known ones but also forced into prostitution. At some places, widows are termed as witches and tortured even by their own kith and kin or other persons from the community. They are treated as bad women by the society.

Ours is a welfare State. It is the foremost duty of the State to initiate welfare measures and to protect and provide maintenance to the hapless widows so that they can live gracefully in the society. It is, therefore, proposed in the Bill to set up a Welfare Board to exclusively look after the welfare of neglected, abandoned and destitute widows.

Hence this Bill.

FINANCIAL MEMORANDUM

Clause 3 of the Bill provides for the establishment of the National Widows Welfare Board. Clause 4 provides for the setting up of a Welfare Fund. Clause 6 provides for facilities like subsistence allowance, free residential accommodation, medical facilities, gainful employment etc. to widows. Clause 8 provides that Central Government shall provide adequate funds for carrying out the purposes of the Bill. The Bill, therefore, if enacted, will involve expenditure from the Consolidated Fund of India. It is estimated that an annual recurring expenditure of rupees one thousand crores approximately is likely to be involved.

A non-recurring expenditure of about rupees two hundred crores is also likely to be involved.
MEMORANDUM REGARDING DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Clause 10 of the Bill empowers the Central Government to make rules for carrying out the purposes of the Bill. The rules will relate to matters of detail only.

The delegation of legislative power is of a normal character.
Dear friends around the world,

We are very honoured to have been given this opportunity to write on His Eminence the 25th Tsem Rinpoche's blog. We wanted to get this information out to create more awareness on basic human rights that are denied to ‘minorities’ within society, such as widows. We wanted to educate others that minorities are humans too and just like us, they are worthy of respect and kindness. In particular, we wanted to highlight the works of Dr Pathak who is doing a great job in assisting people in need. We hope that more people will recognise his works and contribute in any way possible to help him accomplish such a great mission.

Thank you,

Vinnie and Beatrix
According to some parts of the Hindu tradition, women are required to take part in the sati or suttee practice when their husband passes away. This tradition was commonly practised in ancient India and it was not until 1829 that British officials outlawed the practice within their territories. The following decades saw the introduction of similar laws by authorities in the princely states of India. In 1861, the general ban towards the sati practice for the whole of India was issued by Queen Victoria. The sati practice was banned in Nepal in the 1920s.

**What is Sati?**

Sati is the practice among some Hindu communities where recently widowed women – whether voluntarily, by use of force, or coercion – commit suicide after the death of their husbands. The most practised form of sati is when the woman burns herself to death on her husband’s funeral pyre. Other forms of sati include being buried alive with her husband’s corpse or drowning.

The term sati is derived from the name of the goddess Sati, also known as Dakshayani, who self-immolated because she was not able to stomach her father Daksha’s humiliation towards her (living) husband Shiva.

The practice of sati was found among many castes and at every social level. This included both women who were uneducated, as well as the highest-ranking and highly educated women of the time. Sati was considered the highest expression of wifely devotion to their deceased husband. The act of sati was also viewed as a way for widows to purge their sins, releasing them from the karmic circle of birth and death. It was seen as a way to salvation for the dead husband and seven generations of their offspring.

Another factor behind the sati practice was the ownership of wealth and property. Upon her husband’s death, all possessions of the widow would be transferred to his
family, leaving the widow impoverished. In fact, the alternative way that widows were supposed to live after their husbands died was that of a chaste lady. This meant leading a life of asceticism, renouncing all social activities, shaving her head, eating only boiled rice and sleeping on coarse matting (recorded by Moore, 2004). It is because of this lifestyle that many widows chose death in the past.

In 1987, the Indian Government passed the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act. As outlined in Part I, Section 2(c) sati is defined as,

The burning or burying alive of:

- Any widow along with the body of her deceased husband or any other relative or with any article, object or thing associated with the husband or such relative; or
- Any woman along with the body of any of her relatives, irrespective of whether such burning or burying is claimed to be voluntary on the part of the widow or the women or otherwise.

With the Prevention of Sati Act, any form of support, glorification or attempt to commit sati was made illegal. Supporting the practice of sati, which includes coercing or forcing someone to commit sati, can be punished by the death sentence or life imprisonment. For those who glorify sati, this is punishable with one to seven years in prison.

**Why Do Widows Leave Their Families?**

Shunned by society after their husbands die, widows are seen as a financial drain on their families. Hence many widows leave and end up living as the poorest of the poor not because of religious reasons, but because of tradition.
After their husbands’ deaths, widows are not allowed to remarry no matter their age and they are not allowed to wear jewelry. They are forced to shave their heads and to wear white clothes until their death. In some areas of India, widows are allowed to keep their hair and dress in coloured saris but this is more an exception than the rule; in most communities in India, widows are not allowed to do this. Thus after the passing of their husbands, the widows no longer have the life they wished for.

Due to the constant struggle these women face, many run away to the holy city of Vrindavan, a popular Hindu pilgrimage place. Also known as the ‘City of Widows’, the widows go to Vrindavan in the hopes that death will free them from all the emotional and physical suffering they face.

Without education or any skills that would make them employable, the widows beg for alms, or singing religious hymns and chants. Through this method, the widows can earn around USD0.15 (approx. INR10) and a hot meal. Some of the younger and more attractive women are sold into prostitution. In this City of Widows with more than 4,000 temples, no one goes hungry. Locals and pilgrims offer food and money to the widows to gain merits for their spiritual paths. They do however, have to ration the food they receive and though a lucky few have very rundown rented accommodation, most are forced to seek shelter wherever they can. Space in shelters and government-run care homes is limited, so most women are forced to sleep in the streets.

Due to the incorrect projections people have about widows, these women suffer neglect and are looked down upon for the rest of their lives. Moved by the plight of these widows, organisations have formed with the aim to uplift and improve the lives of these women. These human rights organisations play a very important role in changing the lives of widows by giving them hope to live on.

**The Importance of Human Rights Organisations**

Human rights organisations play an extremely important role in society, especially for the forgotten, abandoned and disenfranchised sectors and communities. Because of their inability to speak out about the ongoing denial of their basic human rights, it
is easy for society to forget about them and to somehow assume that these ‘minorities’ are worthless. It is in these situations that human rights organisations are needed to protect and assist the powerless to get back on their own two feet. One such organisation working for the welfare of India’s widows is the Sulabh International Social Service Organisation.

**Sulabh International Social Service Organisation**
This is a non-profit voluntary social organisation founded in 1970 by Dr Bindeshwar Pathak. It was founded on the Gandhian ideals of the emancipation of scavengers (a class of people traditionally considered in Indian society to be unclean and were used to carry human waste). This organisation has been working very hard to eliminate the social prejudice against human scavenger class.

Dr Bindeshwar Pathak
Name: Br. Bindeshwar Pathak
Date of Birth: April 2, 1943
Place of Birth: Rampur Baghel, District Vaishali, Bihar, India

**Education:**
- M.A in Sociology
- M.A in English
- Ph.D. on “Liberation of Scavengers through Low Cost Sanitation”, from Patna University
- Patna, Bihar. R.Litt on “Eradication of Scavenging and Environmental Sanitation in India- a Sociology Study”, from Patna University, Patna, Bihar.

Dr Pathak is an influential humanist and social reformer of contemporary India. His compassion has driven him to stand up for the neglected minority. A social reformer who
has benefited millions of lives, Dr Pathak is an internationally-renowned expert on sanitation. He developed low-cost toilet technology, a two-pit pour flush toilet popularly known as the Sulabh Shauchalaya System. His contributions are widely known in the areas of poverty alleviation and integrated rehabilitation programme for the much needed people in India.’

**Widows of Varanasi**

Sulabh International has adopted hundreds of widows in Varanasi. In Varanasi, widows live scattered in private residences as well as in different Ashrams. In order to survive, many of them have to beg on the streets to support themselves. As such, Dr Pathak vowed to go out his way to help these neglected women.

Following the deaths of their husbands, widows face humiliation and degradation from their families and society which often treats widowhood as something inauspicious. Seeing the sufferings of these widows, Dr Pathak said that his primary concern is to change the mindset, attitude and behaviour of the people towards widows.

“In our country, there are millions of such unfortunate women who lose their husbands untimely, and become widows. Most of them are old, infirm, disabled and have no source of livelihood. Their position becomes miserable if they have dependent children. When a widow does not have any permanent source of income or livelihood, she is driven out of her in-law’s home or even from her parental home. Many such widows can be seen begging in the streets and public places. They are termed as witches and tortured even by their own kith and kin and others. They are treated as bad and unholy women by the society”.

“Ours is a welfare State. It is the foremost duty of the State to initiate welfare measures, protect them and provide maintenance to them so that they can live with dignity and honour”.

Threads of change

Traditional barriers were broken on Rakshabandhan this year when 800 castaway widows of Vrindavan and 200 liberated manual scavengers from Rajasthan tied rakhi on the wrists of 50 Sanskrit scholars and brahmin priests at the Gopinath temple in Vrindavan. The initiative was organised by Sulabh International founder Bindeshwar Pathak. Photographs by Shah Nawaz Khan.
INDIAN WIDOWS CELEBRATE HOLI FESTIVAL – IN PICTURES

Thousands of widows mark the Hindu spring festival of colours at a temple for the first time. In many parts of India widows are not allowed to celebrate Holi or participate in other festivals

Indian widows participate in a celebration of the Holi festival in Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh
Photograph: Harish Tyagi/EPA

Widows in Vrindavan. Part of the festival involves hurling coloured powder and water at other revellers
Photograph: Harish Tyagi/EPA
A child covered with coloured powder at Gopinath Temple, Vrindavan
Photograph: ZUMA Wir/Rex/Shutterstock

Participants throw coloured powder in Vrindavan
Photograph: Harish Tyagi/EPA
Widows celebrate Holi in Vrindavan
Photograph: Harish Tyagi/EPA

A Hindu widow lies on a bed of flower petals at the Gopinath temple
Photograph: Manish Swarup/AP
Widows covered in coloured powder
Photograph: Harish Tyagi/EPA

A young boy closes his eyes as coloured powder and flowers are thrown around at Gopinath temple
Photograph: ZUMA Wir/REX/Shutterstock
Widows take a break during the celebrations
Photograph: Anindito Mukherjee/Reuters

Widows throw coloured powder
Photograph: Manish Swarup/AP
A widow smeared with coloured powder watches others playing at the Gopinath temple
Photograph: Manish Swarup/AP

A reveller holds a dish of dye
Photograph: Harish Tyagi/EPA

Indian widows are traditionally not meant to partake in Holi - the auspicious festival of colour. But this March 21, thousands of widowed women gathered at temples in Vrindavan in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh to celebrate the spring festival.
FOR INDIA’S WIDOWS, A RIOT OF COLOR, AN ACT OF LIBERATION

March 6, 2015 12:14 PM ET
Heard on All Things Considered

JULIE MCCARTHY
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Susannah Ireland for NPR
“I have no one. I’ve lost everything. My children are gone, my parents are gone. My husband’s family doesn’t ask about me. They don’t even look for me, they don’t even know if I eat,” says Manu Ghosh, 85.

That’s her above, seen before and after the Hindu festival of Holi at her ashram in northern India.
Manu was married at age 10 and found her way to the northern city of Vrindavan at 37. By that time, she was already widowed and had lost three children, who she says all died prematurely. Manu is one of many widows among the ashrams of Vrindavan whom I met covering this year’s Holi festival.

Holi is the festival of colors, culminating in the riotous tossing of powder and water balloons meant to herald the arrival of spring. Bonfires on the eve of this ancient celebration mark the triumph of good over evil and are seen as a chance to forgive. It’s celebrated wherever there are people of Indian descent — Bangladesh, Nepal, Guyana, South Africa — but here the celebrations take on the hue of liberation.

Hindu tradition frowns on widows celebrating at such festivals. In some parts of the culture, the women are seen as the cause of their husband’s death and relatives believe they should be cast out. The segregation of widows can be so extreme that in some places they are prevented from attending family gatherings, including weddings. Many poor widows are abandoned by their families and left to fend for themselves. According to census data, India is believed to have tens of millions of widows. Thousands live out their lives in the ashrams in the ancient temple-filled city of Vrindavan, popularly known as the City of Widows.

But when the widows of Vrindavan ignore the social taboo and join in the fun, Holi takes on a whole new dimension. Cavorting in the chaos of color, women young and old stand in showers of rose petals and marigolds and playfully smear each other with
fuchsia, green and gold powder. With this act of joy, the women fight back against restrictions that have ostracized them.

Photographer Susannah Ireland and I spent two days with the widows as they went through their morning rituals, nimbly preparing blossoms that perfumed the celebrations and shopping for new saris. Widows traditionally wear white, but breaking the mold, they go for a splash of color.
Widows are reclaiming their “womanhood,” says Annapurna Sharma, 38, seen fixing her hair in the image above. She traveled 400 miles from Varanasi for her first Holi since her husband died six years ago, and she took the daring step of applying makeup for the occasion.

Urmila Sarkar, 73, balancing blossoms on her head in the image above, says her family wants her to come home, but she prefers to stay at the ashram. “My husband is now Lord Krishna,” she says, flashing a coquettish smile.
It’s not just color that is tossed around. Petals of roses, marigolds and daisies are meticulously gathered to be thrown into the air marking the beginning of festivities. For the third consecutive year, Sulabh International, an Indian nonprofit group, has helped the widows stage the festivities inside the Meera Sahbhagini Ashram, where they live.
Dancers perform Raas Leela, re-enacting Lord Krishna’s playful teasing of Radha, agopi or female devotee who is said to have loved him unconditionally. The ashram widows are often described as Krishna’s gopis, having made him the governing force of their lives.

Here’s the climax of all their work: the widows reveling in the shower of powder that turned the courtyard a cloud of pink. Some are octogenarians, but these spry widows
played pranks that could rival any teenager. They have dance moves to match. They ambush the unsuspecting with the eye-stinging powder. More than once, I missed them coming straight for me. Bam! Another pigment pie in the eye. I worried they’d get sick and that all their frolicking would end badly. But these women are made of sterner stuff, having weathered abuse, rejection, isolation and worse. A little powder was not about to stop them.
Before they played Holi in Vrindavan, there were plenty of tears. Women told me of how their lives broke down, recounting the in-laws who discarded them, the threats of violence from their own sons, and husbands who sold them off to other men. Basana Dasi, 42, was widowed by the age of 15. Dabbing her eyes and nose with her brand new sari, she recalled her mother-in-law saying, “My son is no longer here. What do I do with a daughter-in-law?”

The celebrations are ephemeral. The wounds these women carry will last a lifetime.
During this festival, however, those wounds don’t weigh so heavily. For Shakuntala Devi, 65, it was her first Holi in 27 years. Drenched in color, she beamed, “I was remembering the way we used to play Holi in my family.” Then she adds, “Today, this is my family.”
VRINDAVAN: The widows of Vrindavan, long ostracized and excluded from festivities, took another small step to reclaim their space in society by publicly celebrating Rakhi (Rakshabandhan) here on Saturday, even as a few of them prepared to meet 'brother' Narendra Modi with 1,000 Rakhis and seek his protection.

A delegation of six widows, three each from Vrindavan and Varanasi, has been granted permission to meet the Prime Minister on Sunday morning, according to NGO Sulabh International. They will be carrying the “Modi Rakhs” — each has a picture of the PM — that were hand-made by 100 widows, most of them in their 80s.

“He is an MP from our constituency and is like a brother to us,” said Shakuntala Dhakal, a widow from Varanasi who was here for Saturday’s festivities. “We will tie Rakhi to Modi and seek a better future for widows.”

They will also present to the PM iconic sweets from the two cities — motichur laddu from Varanasi and peda from Vrindavan.

The meeting with Modi highlights the growing confidence of these women and the strides they have taken in the last two years since they started defying oppressive customs. However, for most ‘white widows’ of Vrindavan, a past of denial and oppression still hangs heavy on the present.
At the Rakhi function held at the Ras Behari Sadan and Leela Kunj — two widow ashrams in the heart of the temple town — many widows had not heard about Modi. “What is the name of our prime minister?” asked Sarawati Devi, 81, living in Vrindavan for more than 10 years. “It’s good that he is meeting us. He will get to know of our existence,” she added.

It was a Rakhi to remember for the 800-odd widows. They tied specially-made Rakhis to saints from neighbouring ashrams as well as schoolchildren, forging bonds that tradition had denied them. “For us, the festival used to mean buying a Rakhi from the market and tying it to the statue of Banke Behari,” said Shobita, 64, a widow from Murshidabad, West Bengal.
Vrindavan, a town draped in the cult of Krishna, has traditionally been the refuge of widows shunned by their families across north India and Bengal. Many of them led the life of destitutes, often begging for food or living off the meagre earnings from singing bhajans at the town’s ashrams.

But life for many of these women slowly started changing for the better after the Supreme Court asked Sulabh International, better known for its work on sanitation and toilets, to try and help them.

Since then, the NGO has been giving a monthly stipend of Rs 2,000 to 900 widows living in ashrams. It has provided for them medical facilities, literacy classes and opportunities to learn skills. Besides, Sulabh has also encouraged these women to break social taboos such as publicly celebrating holi and other festivals.

"Participating in raksha bandhan is a continuation of our efforts to bring these widows into the mainstream," said Bindeshwar Pathak, founder-chief of Sulabh. "They must be free to participate in any celebration." Sulabh has also adopted some 200 widows in Varanasi and 70 in the flood-ravaged Kedarnath valley.

The women’s meeting with Modi on Sunday also assumes significance as Sulabh is rallying to bring in a legislation for protection and non-discrimination of the about 4 crore widows in India. "Once the PM forms a bond with these widows, he would be in a better position to appreciate the need for such a legislation," said Pathak.

Photographers’ Blog

RIOT OF COLOR

By Vivek Prakash | March 28, 2013
It's one of those things that you just have to do. Ever since I moved to India, I've always wanted to photograph Holi celebrations in north India. As a kid growing up here, I played with colored powders and water in the streets with my friends. As an adult, I've been lucky enough to have the chance to return with my camera. I had been looking forward to this assignment. I was expecting a riot of a different kind, a riot of color and noise – and that's exactly what I got.

Holi is celebrated widely across India, but it is more popular in the north of the country. The epicenter of all the action is in a triangle of villages around the city of Mathura – the fun begins at Barsana, then moves to Nandgaon, Vrindavan, and Dauji before finally finishing a week of rolling celebrations in the region where the Hindu god Krishna and his consort Radha are thought to have been born and lived. It's a festival that celebrates the arrival of spring, but in this region it also has special significance as it celebrates the story of Radha and Krishna and their love for each other. The enthusiasm of the people is unmatched – the energy combined with sheer numbers make for fantastic scenes drenched in water and color. It makes for delicious pictures. But I have to admit, after having covered it for the first time, it's harder than it looks to get a great picture. Keeping your equipment dry and operational is a big challenge.

On my first day of coverage, I arrived at the village of Barsana early in the morning and headed straight for the main temple where celebrations would take place. I was at first disappointed as the morning session at the temple was a bit subdued. However, by the time the temple re-opened at 4pm it was a different story. There were thousands of people waiting to storm the entry doors. Inside, a sea of bodies heaved against each other, amid projectiles of colored powder and buckets of orange colored water being flung everywhere. It was hard to hold your position steady enough to shoot pictures, let alone compose something nice. At one point, there was so much powder that
photographers were completely caked in it – nostrils and lungs were full of red dust. I wished I had brought a surgical mask instead of a scarf to shield myself.

In an odd tradition, as soon as the fun at the temple is over, people head out into the street for “Lathmar Holi”, in which men from the neighboring village of Nandgaon sing provocative (and sometimes really lewd) songs at women, who then use huge wooden sticks to “beat” the men as they crouch on the ground while holding a shield. I thought it would be just a little bit of fun, but the women really do go for it and I would not want to be caught under one of those sticks! This scene repeats itself the next day in the village of Nandgaon, where there is another huge temple rush – albeit a bit easier to manage as there's space to move around at that temple. Then it's the men from Barsana's turn to be beaten by the women of Nandgaon.

In Vrindavan, the Bankey Bihari temple is tucked away in a small meandering alley. The crowd is unbelievable – the streets are jam packed with revelers headed there, the queues to get in are extremely long, and there is no space to move inside. Devotees constantly smash into each other and push and shove as they make their way to the front of the temple to get a glimpse of the resident deity, all the while shouting slogans and under clouds of flying powder and under torrents of water.

At a shelter for widows who have been abandoned by their families, I was lucky to experience one of the happiest things I’ve ever witnessed. The widows, who traditionally would have shunned celebrations of any kind for fear of social reprisals, threw flowers into the air as they celebrated holi for the first time. Women were crying tears of joy, laughing and singing. I felt moved enough to put down my camera and just take in the bliss for a couple of minutes.

After discussing our coverage with my Chief, Ahmad Masood, we also decided that although the temple scenes are spectacular, they present a problem because day after day, the pictures start to look quite similar. To add variety to the file, I wandered for hours in the narrow lanes around the village to try and get a sense of the mood of Holi in my pictures. My favorite picture of this entire assignment (a boy gleefully spraying blue colored foam as his friends duck out of the way) was found in the alleys of Vrindavan.

In the days that followed, I concentrated my efforts on shooting more of the action on the streets of Vrindavan to add as much variety to our file as I could. I’d decided that even though there were more celebrations in the temples and in the widows’ shelters, it was on the streets that we would find the really fun pictures.

Our coverage finished at the Dauji temple, where I wandered in the tiny village before the “Huranga” celebration which marks the end of Holi celebrations in the region.

As a photographer uninitiated in covering Holi, I was surprised by just how intense the experience is. Not only are you shooting two to three sessions of Holi every day,
but you're trying to make different pictures which add variation to the file over the course of a weeklong assignment. You're doing that while drenched and caked in colored powder and constantly wiping your lens to keep it dry and clean.

I wore the same T-shirt for all 7 days of coverage. The color is impossible to remove, so you are saying goodbye to whatever clothes you wear for Holi. I lost a pair of slippers outside a temple (you can't enter with footwear – my slippers were a cool pair that quickly got nicked). I walked about 3km back to the car barefoot. I wound up buying two sets of 60 rupee slippers instead, not wanting to lose a good pair of shoes to this assignment. One pair of board-shorts tore in Nandgaon (thankfully in a place that didn't outrage anyone's modesty) and I'm planning to throw out a pair of North Face pants when I'm done with this job.

No one has any mercy on photographers and you get as covered in color and water as anyone else. People are constantly smearing the stuff all over you. My scalp is still pink and I have patches of color all over my body. The color hasn't come off with soap or shampoo, but I'm told by experts that caking myself in chickpea flower mixed with yoghurt and then taking a shower does the trick. I wonder if that will clog the drain at my flat in Mumbai.

I was told all sorts of scary stories about dead cameras, ruined lenses and trashed equipment. Well-prepared photographers have lost two or three bodies to Holi. I asked around and took all the advice I could about how to best “Holi-proof” my gear so that I could continue shooting without destroying it. My basic Holi coverage kit contained non-scratch cloth, cling wrap, waterproof covers, nail polish remover, gaffer tape, scarves and handtowels and a dry belt pouch to carry dry items and spare lenses in.

I prepped my cameras and lenses by wrapping them in clingfilm to protect them just in case water somehow got through the rain covers – it's better to be doubly safe. It also makes your camera difficult to operate and it's very hard to judge what pictures are good on the back of an LCD screen covered in food wrap and then a translucent waterproof cover. I shoot in manual only. Changing the ISO and aperture became a real issue as it's very hard to recognize which buttons you need to push under all that wrap. I was surprised because I can usually change all that without having to look at the camera, but I found myself searching for the right buttons all the time. Luckily, as annoying as this was, I got used to it after several days and I credit it with saving all my gear. I've managed to walk away without having any gear damaged, except for a lens filter which smashed when I slipped and fell down a set of stairs in the hotel.

Not bad for 7 days of Holi coverage – losing just one filter, a pair of slippers, board-shorts and a t-shirt. In exchange, I've had one of the best experiences of my life and walked away with many very happy pictures. I'd come back in a heartbeat. But maybe next time, with a water-resistant point and shoot instead of a 5dMkIII and 1d MkIV to worry about!
Indian Hindu widows throw flowers as part of Holi celebrations organized by the NGO Sulabh at the Meera Sahbhagini Ashram in Vrindavan, India. Picture: AP Photo/Kevin Frayer

An Indian Hindu widow covers her face as colored powder is thrown in the air during Holi celebrations organized by the NGO Sulabh at the Meera Sahbhagini Ashram in Vrindavan, India. Picture: AP Photo/Kevin Frayer
An Indian Hindu widow throws flowers as part of Holi celebrations organized by the NGO Sulabh at the Meera Sahbhagini Ashram in Vrindavan, India, Wednesday, March 27, 2013. The widows, many of whom at times have lived desperate lives in the streets of the temple town, celebrated the festival for the first time at the century old ashram. After their husband's deaths the women have been banished by their families to the town where devotees believe Lord Krishna was born, for supposedly bringing bad luck. (AP Photo/Kevin Frayer)
Indian Hindu widows in costume dance in a shower of colored powder and flowers as part of Holi celebrations organized by the NGO Sulabh at the Meera Sahbhagini Ashram in Vrindavan, India, March 27, 2013.

( Kevin Frayer/AP)

An Indian Hindu widow throws red colored powder on two others as they dance as part of Holi celebrations organized by the NGO Sulabh at the Meera Sahbhagini Ashram in Vrindavan, India, March 27, 2013.

( Kevin Frayer/AP)
Indian Hindu widows throw flowers as part of Holi celebrations organized by the NGO Sulabh at the Meera Sahbhagini Ashram in Vrindavan, India, March 27, 2013.

(Keiwn Frayer/AP)

An Indian Hindu widows covers her face as colored powder is thrown in the air during Holi celebrations organized by the NGO Sulabh at the Meera Sahbhagini Ashram in Vrindavan, India, March 27, 2013. The widows, many of whom at times have lived desperate lives in the streets of the temple town, celebrated the festival for the first time at the century old ashram.

(Keiwn Frayer/AP)
Indian Hindu widows throw flowers as part of Holi celebrations organized by the NGO Sulabh at the Meera Sahbhagini Ashram in Vrindavan, India, Wednesday, March 27, 2013. The widows, many of whom at times have lived desperate lives in the streets of the temple town, celebrated the festival for the first time at the century old ashram. After their husband's deaths the women have been banished by their families to the town where devotees believe Lord Krishna was born, for supposedly bringing bad luck. (AP Photo/Kevin Frayer)
Indian Hindu widows watch Holi celebrations organized by the NGO Sulabh at the Meera Sahbhagini Ashram in Vrindavan, India, Wednesday, March 27, 2013. The widows, many of whom at times have lived desperate lives in the streets of the temple town, celebrated the festival for the first time at the century old ashram. After their husband's deaths the women have been banished by their families to the town where devotees believe Lord Krishna was born, for supposedly bringing bad luck. (AP Photo/Kevin Frayer)

Indian Hindu widows in costume dance during Holi celebrations organized by the NGO Sulabh at the Meera Sahbhagini Ashram in Vrindavan, India, Wednesday, March 27, 2013. The widows, many of whom at times have lived desperate lives in the streets of the temple town, celebrated the festival for the first time at the century old ashram. After their husband's deaths the women have been banished by their families to the town where devotees believe Lord Krishna was born, for supposedly bringing bad luck. (AP Photo/Kevin Frayer)
The New York Times
India Ink
Notes on the World's Largest Democracy

HAPPY HOLI!

By VISHNU VARMA | MARCH 26, 2013 11:19 PM March 26, 2013 11:19 pm 11

The festival of Holi has always been a boisterous one, in which Indians wait the entire year for the one day when they can splash colors all over each other.

It is a phenomenon that resonates equally across urban and rural societies but has many variations. While Holi, especially in north Indian cities like Delhi, is often characterized by groups of young men exuberantly tossing powder and water balloons, it is a holiday for everyone.

This year, for the first time, the Uttar Pradesh town of Vrindavan will break the conventional shackles of Hindu tradition and allow widows and women whose partners have left them to play Holi. The area is believed to be the childhood home of...
Lord Krishna and attracts widows from around the country, who come here to pray for better karma in their next life.

Traditionally, these women were expected to stay indoors on Holi, saying prayers, because they are considered an unlucky presence.

Vrindavan's four-day Holi festivities started on Sunday. Over 700 women participated in a celebration where they applied color on each other’s faces and threw flowers into the air at the Meera Sahavagini Ashram.

The celebrations include various cultural programs, including the “Ras-leela,” a re-enactment of the romantic dance between Lord Krishna and his lover, Radha. The events were organized by Sulabh International, a nongovernmental organization that works for the empowerment of these widows, provides them a monthly pension of 2,000 Indian rupees ($37) and medical facilities.

“These widows are like life imprisonment prisoners for no offense of their own,” said Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of Sulabh International, in a telephone interview. “Through the celebration, we hope to restore their dignity and basic human rights that they are entitled to.”

Vrindavan has 1,790 widows and “abandoned women,” according to official figures, but Mr. Pathak said the number is much higher than that.
Meanwhile, in the nearby villages of Nandgaon and Barsana in Uttar Pradesh, Lathmar Holi has taken root. The festival is much more than just celebrating with colors. Men from one village travel to the neighboring village and explicitly verbally harass the women there. Then the women beat them with sticks. Although men are provided with shields and other protective gear, they are not allowed to retaliate.

According to Hindu mythology, Barsana was the home of Radha, Lord Krishna’s lover. Krishna, naughty and mischievous, is believed to have come to Barsana to tease Radha and her friends. Infuriated by his banter, Radha and her friends used to chase him away using sticks.

Widows dancing and throwing flowers into the air during Holi celebrations at the Meera Sahavagini ashram in Vrindavan on Sunday.

Widows throwing flowers into the air during Holi celebrations at the Meera Sahavagini ashram in Vrindavan on Sunday.

Widows dancing and throwing flowers into the air during Holi celebrations at the Meera Sahavagini ashram in Vrindavan on Sunday.
A widow celebrating Holi with flowers at the Meera Sahavagini ashram in Vrindavan on Sunday.

A widow dancing by herself in a dormitory after Holi celebrations at the Meera Sahavagini ashram in Vrindavan on Sunday.
Widows celebrating Holi with flowers and colors at the Meera Sahavagini ashram in Vrindavan on Sunday.

Women praying during the Holi celebrations at the Meera Sahavagini ashram in Vrindavan on Sunday.
NEW DELHI — In India, hundreds of widows participated in a Hindu festival for the first time in decades in a town where many women take shelter after the death of their husbands. It is seen as an important symbol of ending centuries of oppression of widows.

For decades, thousands of widows, who are abandoned by their families, have headed to the pilgrim town of Vrindavan, about 150 kilometers east of New Delhi.

Shunned women
As per tradition that is still followed by some, Hindu widows are considered inauspicious or unlucky. As a result, in many homes, they are treated like outcasts.
and are ostracized by their family and community and not allowed to participate in any celebration. Many are turned out of their homes.

Thousands of these shunned women leave their towns and villages to live in shelters in Vrindavan, which has come to be known as the city of widows. Life is not easy for these destitute widows. Dressed in white - the color of mourning in India, they are often seen begging.

**Breaking tradition**

But this year, hundreds of widows in Vrindavan broke centuries of tradition, when led by social activists, they stepped out of their shelters to participate in the festival of Holi. Holi is a riotous celebration when people come out into the streets and throw colored powder and water at each other.

Earlier, they could only play ‘Holi’ with god Krishna, the main deity in the holy town. A social reformer from Uttar Pradesh, Shravan Kumar Singh, who played Holi with the widows on Sunday, says they felt old barriers had come crashing down.

Singh says many of the women had tears in their eyes when they came out to take part in the revelry. He says many people in the town also appreciated the efforts to reintegrate them in society.

**Celebrations - rehabilitation**

The Holi celebrations were organized by Sulabh International, which last year launched a rehabilitation program for widows in five government-run shelters. This involves giving them education, vocational skills, health care facilities and an allowance of $40 a month to ensure that they have enough food.
Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of Sulabh, also joined the celebrations. He says bringing the widows back into the social mainstream has given them a new lease of life. “When I came last, in August 2012, everybody used to say ‘no, we want to die now. We don’t want to live more.’ Yesterday when we celebrated Holi, they all said, no, no, no, we want to live, they are forgetting the past,” he stated.

Sulabh International began work in Vrindavan last year after the supreme court took note of the poor conditions under which the widows live and stressed the need to ameliorate their plight. The Vrindavan widows have become symbols of centuries of oppression of women who lose their husbands.
Abandoned widows have broken taboos and are taking part for the first time in the exuberant annual Hindu festival of colours, said a charity working to end the stigma surrounding the women.

Banished by families after their husbands’ deaths for supposedly bringing bad luck, desperately poor widows have for centuries travelled to the northern city of Vrindavan, where lord Krishna is said to have grown up, to pray and wait to die.

But this year, the widows in Vrindavan in Mathura district of Uttar Pradesh, are taking part in Holi, which heralds the advent of spring, Sulabh, a civic charity, said.

“It’s a Holi of hope for these women,” Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of Sulabh International, which works with the widows, said, saying the women would take part in more festival celebrations over the next few days.
On Sunday, hundreds of widows participated in the first day of the festivities which culminate tomorrow, throwing coloured powder at each other, dancing to traditional Holi songs and showering each other with flowers.

“In this Holi we are celebrating we are trying to free these widows from the shackles of tradition,” Pathak said.

The women, cast off by relatives who see them as a financial drain and consider even their shadows a curse, have traditionally sung hymns and begged in the pilgrimage city on the banks of the Yamuna River.

“The ‘shame’ of widowhood is still very strong in some traditional quarters - they aren't allowed to celebrate, attend marriages, they’re supposed to live in seclusion, shave their heads and dress in white,” Pathak said.

“It is essentially a form of life imprisonment for these widows,” he said.

Their plight was depicted in the 2005 Oscar-nominated film Water.

Sulabh, which has done pioneering social work in India in sanitation and other fields, was tasked by the Supreme Court last August to work with the women after reports of widows' bodies being put in sacks and thrown in the river.

Sulabh has been providing a monthly allowance of Rs2,000 ($40) a month to 700 widows and teaching skills but is reaching only a small number of the estimated 15,000 widows said to be living in Vrindavan.

The women who took part in Holi celebrations on Sunday said the day was special.

“We used to watch men and women play Holi from the windows of our ashram (secluded community). The celebrations of the town are legendary,” Pushpa Adhikari told the Times of India.

“Cutting the umbilical cord from the past is no easy task, and you can’t do that without raising eyebrows,” said social commentator Paras Nath Choudhary.

“It is reflection of changing times that instead of opposition, people came forward to support the social reform movement,” he said.

Said social activist Padmini Iyer: “This is a clear departure from tradition. Who would have thought till a few years ago that hundreds of widows would be able to sprinkle colourful flowers and petals on one another to play Holi?.

The widows also shared food with some of the outsiders and foreigners.
Widows in Vrindavan, a small religious town in northern India, celebrated the colourful Hindu spring festival of Holi for the first time.

Breaking a long tradition, more than 800 widows, who generally do not participate in any festivities, came forward to sing and dance.

“Vrindavan Holi is an effort to free widows from the shackles of age-old tradition. Not only will the widows play Holi, they will also participate in cultural programmes,” said Bindeshwar Pathak, chief of Sulabh International, which organised the event.
The widows played with other widows turning the event into a riot of colours. Although they have been observing the festival for decades, until this year, they have not participated in the celebrations due to the taboo attached to them.

“We would watch men and women play Holi from the windows of our ashram. The celebrations of the town are legendary,” Pushpa Adhikari, a widow living in Vrindavan for 17 years, told the Times of India.

The event, part of a multi-pronged approach, was organised to bring the widows into the mainstream of society.

Sulabh has been tasked to keep a tab on the status of widows in the town, by the Supreme Court of India.

Many of the Vrindavan women lost their husbands when they were quite young. It has been widely documented that they lead a miserable life, with no money, no proper clothes or food and lack healthcare.

Quite a few of them are said to hail from well-off families but have been shunned by their near and dear ones.

“When Lal Bahadur Shastri [former Indian prime minister] came to Calcutta, the streets were full of flowers. After that day, I’m seeing so many flowers for the first time,” said an elderly woman who was unable to participate in the event.
A widow dances by herself in a dormitory during holi celebrations at the Meera Sahavagini ashram in Vrindavan.

Widows raise their hands as they throw flowers into the air during a holi celebration at the Meera Sahavagini ashram in Vrindavan in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.
A widow makes religious beads during a training class at the Meera Sahavagini ashram in the pilgrimage town of Vrindavan

A widow walks through a street outside the Meera Sahavagini ashram in the pilgrimage town of Vrindavan
Widows gather to sing religious songs at the Meera Sahavagini ashram in the pilgrimage town of Vrindavan

Widows attend a class at the Meera Sahavagini ashram in the pilgrimage town of Vrindavan

Reuters
A widow prays inside her room at the Meera Sahavagini ashram in the pilgrimage town of Vrindavan

http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/holi-vrindavan-widows-colour-spring-festival-gulal-449949
ABANDONED INDIAN WIDOWS BREAK TABOOS TO JOIN HINDU FESTIVAL HOLI

MARCH 25, 2013 11:32PM

Indian widows celebrate the Hindu festival of Holi in Vrindavan. Banished by families after their husbands' deaths for supposedly bringing bad luck, widows have for centuries travelled to the city, where the Hindu god Krishna is said to have grown up, to pray and wait to die. Picture:

ABANDONED Indian widows have broken taboos and are taking part for the first time in the exuberant annual Hindu festival of colours, said a charity working to end the stigma surrounding the women.

Banished by families after their husbands’ deaths for supposedly bringing bad luck, desperately poor widows have for centuries travelled to the northern city of Vrindavan, where the Hindu god Krishna is said to have grown up, to pray and wait to die.

But this year, the widows in Vrindavan, 135 kilometres south of the Indian capital New Delhi, are taking part in the Hindu festival of colours known as Holi, which heralds the advent of spring, Sulabh, a civic charity, said.
“It’s a Holi of hope for these women,” Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of Sulabh International, which works with the widows, told AFP, saying the women would take part in more festival celebrations over the next few days.

On Sunday, hundreds of widows participated in the first day of the festivities which culminate on Wednesday, pelting coloured powder at each other, dancing to traditional Holi songs and showering each other with flowers.

“In this Holi we are celebrating we are trying to free these widows from the shackles of tradition,” said Mr Pathak.

The women, cast off by relatives who see them as a financial drain and consider even their shadows a curse, have traditionally sung hymns and begged in the pilgrimage city on the banks of the Yamuna River.

Hindu devotees participate in rituals for the Lathmar Holi festival celebrating spring at the Nandji Temple in Nandgaon. Picture: AFP

“The ‘shame’ of widowhood is still very strong in some traditional quarters - they aren't allowed to celebrate, attend marriages, they’re supposed to live in seclusion, shave their heads and dress in white,” Mr Pathak explained.

“It is essentially a form of life imprisonment for these widows,” he said. The women’s plight was depicted in the 2005 Oscar-nominated film Water.

Sulabh, which has done pioneering social work in India in sanitation and other fields, was tasked by the Supreme Court last August to work with the women after reports of widows’ bodies being put in sacks and thrown in the river.
Sulabh has been providing a monthly allowance of 2000 rupees ($35) a month to 700 widows and teaching skills but is reaching only a small number of the estimated 15,000 widows said to be living in Vrindavan.

The women who took part in Holi celebrations Sunday said the day was special.

“We used to watch men and women play Holi from the windows of our ashram (secluded community). The celebrations of the town are legendary,” Pushpa Adhikari told The Times of India.

School girls play with coloured powder outside a school in Allahabad as they celebrate Holi, the popular Hindu spring festival of colours. Picture: AFP
This Holi came with a difference for the widows and abandoned women living in Vrindavan, near Mathura.

Unlike earlier years, when these women — addressed respectfully as ‘mayyas’ or ‘matas’ — played Holi only with ‘Thakurji’ (Lord Krishna), this time it was a riot of colours, flowers and lots of people to celebrate with.

In a departure from tradition, hundreds of widows gathered to play Holi with one another with flower petals and gulal (coloured powder).
The spirit of Holi was palpable across the five government-run shelter homes where Sulabh International has been giving stipend, arranging for food and providing healthcare facilities to the women.

Around 800 women participated in the festivities on Sunday that marked the first day of the four-day celebrations. The celebrations were held at the 100-year-old Meera Sahbhagini ashram.

To add more colour, dozens of former conservancy workers were brought to the ashram. “Life has changed so much for us ever since we gave up conservancy work,” says Sheela Athwale. She started doing the work from the age of 7, but gave it up in 2006 when Sulabh imparted skills to them and sent their children to school. Many like her were imparted training for cutting and tailoring, and other crafts.

“You will not believe it, I have been to New York and Paris with Sulabh,” Ms. Athwale said with a glitter in her eyes. There were 115 families involved in conservancy work in her town in Alwar while the adjoining Tonk district had over 200. None exists now.

“In an effort to bring widows to the mainstream and help in their social assimilation, we have organised several events to encourage them to participate in Holi celebrations at Vrindavan,” founder of Sulabh Bindeshwar Pathak said.

As part of the celebrations, traditional “Raas-Leela” dance and other programmes have been organised at the ashrams. “I used to play Holi earlier also but not with so many people,” said an old and frail Rajdhwoni, her white outfit totally pink at the end of the celebrations.

Sulabh is working for the empowerment of these widows. In August 2012, the Supreme Court directed the U.P. government to ensure at least proper cremation and last rites for the widows in Vrindavan.

The court suggested that Sulabh can be contacted for help. Since then, the NGO is taking care of these widows by providing them healthcare and a monthly allowance of Rs. 2,000.

They are now learning English and earning by way of jobs such as making agarbathis and garlands.

Among the widows are many who lost their husbands at 16 or 17 and have since lived an obscure life, abandoned by their families.

“I want to ensure that no widow is found begging on the streets,” said O.P. Yadav, district probation officer of Mathura, who participated in the function.
A group of Indian widows has created waves by taking part in the annual Hindu festival of colors, Holi. A charity taking care of the women says it is a symbolic beginning of the end to an ingrained form of prejudice.

Thousands of years after a Hindu text described widows as “more inauspicious than all other inauspicious things,” in many parts of India, after their husbands’ death, Hindu women remain virtual pariahs.

In many sections of the conservative Hindu society the Hindu widows are traditionally expected to renounce materialistic pleasure - they are barred from marrying again and taking part in many colorful celebrations or festivities.

Deserted by relatives and society, many poor Hindu widows have for centuries landed in the Hindu holy city of Vrindavan, in northern India, to spend the last days of their life depending on charity.
With almost no support from the government, most Vrindavan widows survive by begging. But in recent years some non-government organizations and other charities have come forward to provide support.

Non-profit organization Sulabh International last year adopted five widow homes in Vrindavan after pledging that it would help the widows “live with dignity.”

‘Dreams come true’

On Sunday, 800 widows from the five homes made history by celebrating Holi - the annual Hindu festival of colors, albeit before the rest of the country. The women ended their celebration on Wednesday, the day that Holi began across India as a whole.

Pictures of the exuberant widows showering flower petals and colored powder at each other and dancing to traditional Holi songs were broadcast live on national TV channels. Bindeshwar Pathak the founder of Sulabh said that his group sponsored the celebration to make the widows feel free from the “shackles of tradition”.

“The widows are forbidden to look attractive. They are barred from wearing any form of color. They are made to wear only white saris and keep their head shaven. The patriarchal society shackled the widows in all ways possible,” Mr Pathak said to DW.

“For many years most of these widows were forced to live a life doomed in penury and seclusion. But after we adopted them, the basic needs of their life are fulfilled. By wanting to celebrate Holi they wanted to fulfill one of their long-cherished desires. I immediately said that our organisation must support their Holi.”

Most of the widows who took part in the Holi said that it was a “dream-come-true” celebration for them.

Minati Majumder, who arrived Vrindavan from West Bengal 21 years ago, said that she never believed that as a widow she could take part and enjoy Holi before her death.

“For two decades I used shut myself in our room because we knew we were widows and Holi was not for us,” Minati, 68, said to DW.

“On Sunday I really enjoyed Holi at our home, I danced around… the way I had done in my childhood and when my husband was alive. I enjoyed it a lot. On Sunday I felt I was 30 years younger.”

Scenes divide opinion

The celebration of Holi by the widows in Vrindavan has triggered mixed reactions across the country. Jogeswar Baba, a Hindu monk in Vrindaban said, widows had indulged in anti-Hindu act by celebrating Holi.
“All Hindus know that widows never play Holi. The poor widows in Vrindavan struggle to manage their livelihood. They could have never thought of celebrating the Holi on their own,” Baba said to DW.

“The organisation (of Sulabh) is spoiling the widows. It helped the widows indulge in a forbidden ritual.”

However, rights activist and professor in Shillong’s North Eastern Hill University, Prasenjit Biswas, said that it was the patriarchal priestly class that distorted the Hindu scriptures and introduced the taboos that ran contrary to religious tradition.

“Debarring the widows from playing Holi smacks of sexist anti-Hindu, illiberal and orthodox prejudice amounting to violation of fundamentals rights,” Prof Biswas told DW.

Meanwhile, All India Progressive Women’s Association secretary, Kavita Krishnan, said that it was an indictment of modern India that the notion of widows celebrating Holi attracted so much attention.

“We welcome the celebration of the Holi by the widows in Vrindavan. We still await the day when Vrindavan will have no women set apart as “widows” - rather all women will be recognised as persons in their own right, with inalienable citizenship rights,” Ms Krishnan said to DW.
Vrindavan: Hundreds of widows of Vrindavan, who have lived a life of penury, earning a meagre 5 rupees each day for singing early-morning bhajans at temples here, now have a life of dignity, thanks to non-governmental organisation Sulabh International.

Sulabh, a leading campaigner for sanitation, has decided to take care of the basic needs of the Vrindavan widows, from food to healthcare.
Only six months ago, many widows, in their traditional white cotton saris, could be seen moving from temple to temple with begging bowls, chanting “Radhe, Radhe”. Poor and malnourished, many of these women in the holy city of Lord Krishna were just skin and bone.

Things are changing, though, in a place that has earned a dubious reputation as a City of Widows.

“These days, you won’t find old women at every nook and corner, except the few who cannot shake off old habits. Now, the widows spend their time in ashrams, no more begging on the streets. They watch TV and chant bhajans within their ashrams, where they are provided basic amenities,” a resident of the city and music maestro Acharya Jaimini told IANS.

The change is thanks to the initiatives of Sulabh International, whose founder, Bindeshwar Pathak said Sunday that more than 800 widows have registered at the two government shelter homes; each of them will be given Rs.2,000 per month, for basic needs.

The initiative comes in the wake of a Supreme Court order of August 2012.

Justices D.K. Jain and Madan B. Lokur had directed the Uttar Pradesh government in August last year to ensure at least proper cremation and last rites for the ‘Vrindavan widows’, in keeping with their religious beliefs.

The bench also issued directions that the widows receive immediate relief, including proper food, regular visits from doctors of the Mathura civil hospital, and homes with adequate sanitation.

The apex court directed the centre to play a proactive role in the matter.

The apex court had suggested that International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) and NGO Sulabh International could be contacted to extend help to the 1,790-odd poor widows living in deplorable conditions in the four government shelters of Vrindavan.

“The idea is to ensure that widows living in the government-run shelters in Vrindavan should not be forced to beg or go to bed hungry,” Bindeshwar Pathak told IANS, adding that Sulabh had decided that a sum of Rs.2,000 would be given to each of these widows a month.

The money would be paid by Sulabh, which has been paying the widows Rs.1,000 each per month since last year.

The apex court had expressed shock that the bodies of two widows who had died at the government homes were chopped and the pieces put into gunny bags for disposal.
in the Yamuna, on the plea that there were inadequate funds for proper cremation rites.

Sulabh has also handed over over five well-equipped ambulances for the exclusive use of the widows. The NGO has gifted the Vrindavan widow shelter homes medical equipment and television sets too.

The NGO also plans an education programme to restore the women's confidence. The widows have started learning Hindi, English and Bengali. The four widows who died at these homes since the NGO began its initiatives here last year were accorded final rites in accordance with Hindu custom.

Sulabh has also donated 50 sewing machines, and some women have begun to use these to earn a living. Besides, they also make Agarbatti (incense sticks) and flower garlands for sale.

Sulabh is renowned for freeing large numbers of people from the scourge of lifting night soil. “That experience came handy here,” the 70-year-old Pathak, who launched Sulabh decades ago, said, explaining that people freed from toiling with night soil had been rehabilitated in some measure through education and vocational training.

“We are using our vast experience here in Vrindaban and want to see that the widows no longer live as an unwanted burden on the society,” Pathak said.

Although Sulabh has taken up the initiative without much support, Pathak says: “We will approach the central as well as state governments and big corporate houses for help. The idea is to ensure a dignified life to the widows.”

(Brij Khandelwal can be contacted at brij.k@ians.in)

SUMMARY:

Vrindavan Feb 24 (IANS) Hundreds of widows of Vrindavan, who have lived a life of penury, earning a meagre 5 rupees each day for singing early-morning bhajans at temples here, now have a life of dignity, thanks to non-governmental organisation Sulabh International.

Indo-Asian News Service
The women who sat through the Holi function called it a special day. “When Lal Bahadur Shastri came to Calcutta, the streets were full of flowers. After that day, I’m seeing so many flowers for the first time,” said a woman. (TOI Photo)
Around 800 women participated in the event that marked the first day of the four-day celebrations. The celebrations were held at the 100-year-old Meera Sahbhagini ashram. (TOI Photo)

Widows throw flowers into the air during the holi celebration. (Reuters Photo)
INDIA SOAKS IN COLOURS OF HOLI

Agencies |

Widows play music and chant as others throw flowers as part of Holi celebrations organized by the NGO Sulabh at the Meera Sahbhagini Ashram in Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh. History was rewritten when hundreds of widows in Vrindavan, sprinkled colours and flower petals on each other and played Holi.
The widows feel such celebrations would prove to be an unprecedented step towards ending social prejudice against them. The event this year may need some amount of change in the mindset of the society. 

A boy covered in coloured powder poses for pictures with a group of women during Holi celebration. (Reuters)
Breaking the shackles of tradition, around 800 widows played Holi with gulal and flowers in the land of Lord Krishna, Vrindavan in four-day Holi celebrations that began on March 24.

Women throw flowers into the air during a Holi celebration at the Meera Sahavagini ashram in Vrindavan. (Reuters)

As part of Holi celebrations, traditional Raas-Leela dance and other programmes have also been organised. A Widow walks as others throw flowers during Holi celebrations. (AP)
Vrindavan Holi is an effort to free widows from the shackles of age-old tradition. Not only will the widows play Holi, they will also participate in cultural programmes.

Widows pray during Holi celebrations at an event organized by the NGO Sulabh at the Meera Sahbhagini Ashram in Vrindavan. (AP)

However, the 'breaking' of traditions by widows in Vrindavan has drawn criticism from a section of religious leaders who believe that it is an 'infringement of our ancient culture'.

Widows throw flowers and gulalduring Holi celebrations. (AP)
In the past, widows living in the ashrams could have played Holi only with Thakurji (Lord Krishna). Widows raise their hands as they throw flowers into the air during a Holi celebration. (Reuters)

A veteran in the popular Ram Lila act, Shankar Lal Chaturvedi criticised the event, saying, ‘The manner in which they smeared face of each other with gulal is not good.’ Widows throw flowers into the air during a holi celebration. (Reuters)
Time

IF YOU’RE AN INDIAN WIDOW, YOUR CHILDREN COULD KICK YOU OUT AND TAKE EVERYTHING

Losing a husband in India forces many women into a life of begging and destitution, and despite the country’s development little is being done to change things

By Nilanjana Bhowmick / Radhakund @nilanjanab Oct. 07, 2013

The verandah of the Bihari temple, in Radhakund, a few kilometers away from the Hindu temple town of Vrindavan, comes alive with chants and grateful ululations at 11 o’clock every morning as widows in white saris eat free meals of lentils and rice. “If not for this meal, I would go hungry most days,” says Shakti Dasi, a widow from the northeastern Indian state of Tripura.

Dasi is among the 500 women who eat at the temple kitchen, run by Delhi-based nonprofit, Maitri. Vrindavan and Radhakund are home to around 15,000 widows, most of whom were driven from their homes by family members. “In our country, when women become widows, they cease to exist,” says Winnie Singh, executive director and co-founder of Maitri. “It is a failure not only of the government but of society at large.”
Consider Dasi. The 66-year-old has been on her own for three decades, forced out years ago, she says, by her own sons. “If I asked for money, they would beat me,” she said. She eventually signed away her rights to the small grocery store she ran and set out on a one-way pilgrimage to Vrindavan. Illiterate and unskilled, Dasi, like most widows in Vrindavan and Radhakund, sings religious songs for many hours a day, earning less than a dollar, or sometimes some food. Her ankles are bruised purple-black from standing for hours during the hymns and chants.

It is striking that in the 30 years since Dasi fled, not much has changed for India’s widows. A recent report in the Wall Street Journal examined the harsh life awaiting Punita Devi, the wife of Akshay Kumar Singh, one of the man who has been sentenced to death for raping and murdering a 23-year-old paramedic intern in Delhi last December. Singh hasn’t been hung yet, but Devi’s in-laws have already refused to look after her. Her own parents say they are too poor to take her back.

(MORE: All in a Day’s Work: Can India Promise Its Poor Households 100 Days’ Work a Year?)

“In India widows are treated as untouchables,” says Bindeshwar Pathak, the founder of Sulabh International, a Delhi-based nonprofit. Sulabh helps around a thousand widows in Vrindavan and Varanasi, giving them a monthly allowance of $31, as well as health care assistance. Sulabh is also working on a draft bill, which it hopes to table in Parliament next year. The draft suggests a monthly pension for abandoned and destitute widows and to make their eviction from either their parental or husband’s house a punishable crime. “They have to give up everything … and live a life of isolation,” says Pathak. “That it is happening even today is a huge shame.”

There is the 2007 Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act that makes it an offense for children to abandon their parents, but many of India’s 40 million widows are not aware of their rights under it, and the act provides for only relatively mild penalties (three months jail or a fine not exceeding $100).

“Women fear exercising their rights because they do not want to be branded a bad woman, a bad mother,” says Singh. “We would love to ensure that each of these women live a dignified life, but the magnitude of the problem is depressing.”

For many, there is nothing to do but contemplate the injustice of what has happened to them, with religion of little or no comfort. “I came to Vrindavan looking for my god,” Dasi says, her voice quavering with emotion. “Instead I have become a beggar.”

It was exactly a year ago that The Hindu wrote about the plight of abandoned and destitute women, particularly widows, who take shelter in Vrindavan, prompting the National Legal Services Authorities (NALSA) to take action. It filed a social justice litigation before the Supreme Court for ameliorating the pitiable condition of these women and directing the District Legal Services Authority of Mathura to conduct a survey of these destitute women.

On Sunday, when Sulabh International - one of the two non-governmental organisations chosen by the Apex Court to provide help to these unfortunate women-- went to Vrindavan to announce free dinner for those living in government run shelter homes and facilities for a dignified cremation, it almost resulted in a stampede with the inmates scrambling to receive Rs. 500 distributed by the founder of Sulabh International Bindeshwar Pathak.
A good meal with ‘jalebi’
The corridors of Swadhar Mahila Ashray at Chaitanya Vihar-11 which presented a serene look last year with the inmates preferring to keep to themselves suddenly became riotous as women from the nearby shelter homes also turned up to receive the money and enjoy a good meal which included ‘jalebi.’

The entry of ‘outsiders’ evoked anger among the residents of this hostel who came out of their rooms to guard the premises. It took a while before the situation was brought under control and women—both from this ashram and others—were made to queue up to receive a one-time grant of Rs. 500 after ensuring their name was registered for receiving regular dinner.

“No woman will sleep hungry,” Mr Pathak told a group of media persons who had accompanied him to Vrindavan. Whether women would be given cash so that they cook their own food or whether they will be provided pre-cooked food would be decided by Monday when Sulabh shoulders the responsibility of providing a decent dinner at four government-run shelter homes.

In a recent order, the court had asked the NALSA to contact the Sulabh International to find out whether they could come forward to help the 1,780-odd widows living in four government shelters at Vrindavan.

Proper last rites
Sulabh International will also speak to the local authorities to fund the setting up of an electric crematorium where these women could be given a dignified cremation.

With his vast experience in the field of low-cost sanitation and social upliftment of the manual scavengers, Mr Pathak said capable widows would be motivated to undergo vocational training so that they can earn their livelihood. “Sulabh will arrange training and provide employment to able-bodied widows,” he said.

On being asked about those in private shelter homes and those without shelter, Mr Pathak said the process had just started and would eventually cover as many as possible. He said the organisation would arrange regular health check ups for the widows.

“Right now we will start on our own, but at the same time we will approach Central as well as State governments and big corporate houses for help. The idea is to ensure a dignified life to the widows,” he added.

The Supreme Court had recently directed the Uttar Pradesh government to at least ensure that proper last rites were performed to Vrindavan widows as per their religion after the DLSA Mathura report suggested that at some places, the bodies of
the widows were cut to piece for disposal by sweepers as there was no provision for cremation at these homes.

**We need respect, dignity**
While most women seemed indifferent to the proposals, others claimed that many rich people did come to the ashrams off and on to distribute alms and cash. “What we need is respect and dignity. We can forgo one meal but cannot be fighting with each other like cats and dogs for just Rs 500.

VRINDAVAN: They sang and danced, laughed and shed tears. They threw flowers at each other and played with gulal. The widows of Vrindavan celebrated Holi with a riot of colours on Sunday, defying tradition that bids them to stay away from festivities of all kind.

These widows of the holy town — tragic icons of institutionalized oppression against women — have been observing Holi for decades. But it had always been a quiet affair, within the confines of their ashrams. They would enact scenes from Krishna’s ‘Raas leela’, shower each other with flowers and occasionally use a bit of gulal.

“We would watch men and women play Holi from the windows of our ashram. The celebrations of the town are legendary,” said Pushpa Adhikari, a widow from Bengal, who came to Vrindavan 17 years ago.

On Sunday, though, the widows came out in the open with a cathartic celebration in front of reporters from across the world. They played ‘Raas leela’ in new clothes and danced to traditional Holi songs amid a shower of flowers and colour.
‘A special day’

“It’s a Holi of hope. The message that goes out from the celebration is that widows want to be part of the mainstream. They too have aspirations that should be fulfilled,” said Bindeshwar Pathak, head of Sulabh International, which organized the event.

Sulabh was mandated by the Supreme Court last August to work among widows of the holy town to ameliorate their suffering and check the practice of begging. It began by distributing a stipend of Rs 1,000 per month (which was last month raised to Rs 2,000), providing medical facilities, teaching them to read and write and giving providing means to earn a living.

The task, however, is enormous. Sulabh’s help reaches around 700 of the women, those who stay at the five government-run ashrams in the Vrindavan. There is no clear estimate of the total number of widows in the town, but it is believed that a majority live in rented accommodation, sharing a single room with many others.

An NCW sample survey in 2009 found that 89% of Vrindavan widows were illiterate. Most had children or relatives, who refused to take care of them. Around 70% received no pension and almost 60% had no ration cards, forcing them to depend on alms and singing bhajan to survive.

That change would come slowly was evident at Sunday’s Holi celebrations held at the Meera Sehbhagini Mahila Ashram. Most other widows, who live in government ashrams and have started receiving the Rs 2,000 stipend, sat quietly through the festivities.

Many of them have ailments that aren’t getting proper treatment or attention. Javitri Tomar, a former resident of Kolkata who has a damaged leg, said the ashram officials wanted money to provide her with a wheelchair.

Lakkhi Patra, another ashram inmate from Bengal, said the diabetes medicine given to her by a doctor did not have any effect. She had to bring her stock of medicines from Bengal.

But even the women who sat through the Holi function admitted that the day was special. “When Lal Bahadur Shastri came to Calcutta, the streets were full of flowers. After that day, I’m seeing so many flowers for the first time,” said a woman sitting in a chair away from the action.

India Today in

BREAKING BARRIERS, VRINDAVAN WIDOWS PLAY A COLOURFUL HOLI BREAKING THE SHACKLES OF TRADITION, HUNDREDS OF WIDOWS PLAYED HOLI WITH GULAL AND FLOWERS IN THE LAND OF LORD KRISHNA

PTI | Vrindavan, March 25, 2013 | UPDATED 14:16 IST

Holi is a festival of colours and ordinarily it is celebrated by all and sundry but the widows. This time Vrindavan has got an extra pinch of colour with widows being part of the Holiclebration.

Breaking the shackles of tradition, hundreds of widows played Holi with gulal and flowers in the land of Lord Krishna. Around 800 widows participated in the festivities in ashrams of Vrindavan in four-day Holi celebrations that began yesterday.

As part of Holi celebrations, traditional ‘Raas-Leela’ dance and other programmes have also been organised.

Vrindavan Holi is an effort to free widows from the shackles of age-old tradition.

Indians get drenched in colours of Holi

Published Friday, March 06, 2015

Widows daubed in colours dance as they take part in the Holi celebrations organised by non-governmental organisation Sulabh International at a widows' ashram at Vrindavan organised by non-governmental organisation Sulabh International at a widows' ashram at Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh March 5, 2015. REUTERS/Adnan Abidi
People sing and dance while celebrating Holi, the Festival of Colours, in Kathmandu March 5, 2015. REUTERS/Navesh Chitrakar

A man throws coloured powder on widows as they take part in the Holi celebrations organised by a non-governmental organisation Sulabh International at a widows' ashram at Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh March 4, 2015. REUTERS/Jitendra Prakash
Children covered in coloured powder play during celebrations of Holi, also known as the festival of colours, at the Society for the Education of the Crippled in Mumbai March 4, 2015. REUTERS/Danish Siddiqui

People gather to celebrate Holi, the Festival of Colours, in Kathmandu March 5, 2015. Holi heralds the beginning of spring and is celebrated all over Nepal. REUTERS/Navesh Chitrakar
A woman performs ritual around a bonfire during Holi celebrations at the premises of the Shri Swaminarayan Temple in Karachi March 5, 2015. REUTERS/Akhtar Soomro

Members of the Pakistani Hindu community gather around a bonfire (unseen) as they take part in Holi celebrations at the premises of the Shri Swaminarayan Temple in Karachi March 5, 2015. REUTERS/Akhtar

Widows daubed in colours dance as they take part in the Holi celebrations organised by non-governmental organisation Sulabh International at a widows' ashram at Vrindavan organised by non-governmental organisation Sulabh International at a widows' ashram at Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh March 5, 2015. REUTERS/Adnan Abidi

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Indian widows break tradition and celebrate Holi

*Shunned women attend festivities in Vrindavan, one of two north Indian cities known as the 'cities of widows'.*

Showkat Shafi | 03 Mar 2015 15:09 GMT | Arts & Culture, Asia, India

Vrindavan, India - Breaking the centuries-old custom of widows not celebrating festivals, Tukni Devi, a 90-year-old, took part in Holi celebrations for the first time in 66 years. Widowed at the age of 24, Devi was shunned by her family and lived as a recluse in an ashram in the holy Indian city of Varanasi.

"Widows in our society are treated worse than animals. I was abandoned by my family to starve and fend for myself. The society thinks we are not worthy of living with them as we lost our husband. I have never celebrated any festival after his death," she said.

Holi, the festival of colours, is one of the biggest Hindu holidays celebrated across India. However, orthodox traditions forbid widows from taking part in the celebrations, which involves playing with coloured powder. In an effort to draw these widows into mainstream society and lower the social stigma surrounding them, the NGO Sulabh International organised three days of Holi festivities for widows living in the northern Indian cities of Vrindavan and Varanasi. The two holy cities are located in the state of Uttar Pradesh and are often referred to as the cities of widows. Women who are shunned by society after the deaths of their
husbands are often abandoned in these cities or go there to voluntarily seek refuge in the different ashrams for widows.

"It was in 2011 that we received a letter from the Supreme Court of India about the pathetic condition of widows living in Vrindavan and Varanasi. They were starving and were not even managing to get one meal in a day. Their condition was worse than stray animals. We started the process of giving them two meals a day and providing financial assistance," said Vinita Verma, vice president of Sulabh International.

"This kind of celebrations and activities is being done to improve the condition of these widows. We did face resistance from the orthodox members of the society but we will also not give up. Traditionally they are allowed to just wear a white sari [the traditional colour for widows] and cannot wear any makeup. Here they will play with colours, wear colourful clothes and some of them have even decided to apply makeup," she added.

The celebrations that took place at Pagal Baba Widow Ashram in Vrindavan saw participation by more than 1,000 widows. Over 1,400kg of flower petals and 1,000kg of gulal (coloured powder) were brought in by the NGO for the celebrations.

"Life is tough in the widow ashram. I am the youngest in the ashram and I lost my husband three years ago. We are expected to give up on all the earthly desires and just wait for death. I have been leading a life of hopelessness because there is still a long life ahead of me. However this celebration is giving me hope and I have been never been so happy," said Annapurna Sharma, 38, a widow from Varanasi.

Another participant in the celebrations was octogenarian Manu Ghosh who has lived in an ashram for widows in Vrindavan after she lost her husband when she was 37.
Vrindavan is also known as the ‘city of widows’ due to the high number of widows living in various shelters in the city. These widows, shunned by society, are abandoned here from across the country.

A widow praying before attending Holi celebrations.
Showkat Shafi/Al Jazeera

Widows from Varanasi waiting in a line for breakfast in a Vrindavan widow ashram.

Showkat Shafi/Al Jazeera

These widows are ostracised from society and are expected to shun worldly pleasures of life, including wearing colours. They live in acute poverty and are often seen begging on the streets of Vrindavan and Varanasi.
Showkat Shafi/Al Jazeera

Tukni Devi, 90, was widowed at the young age of 24. She lives in an ashram in Varanasi after being ostracised by society and this was the first time in 66 years when she celebrated Holi.

Showkat Shafi/Al Jazeera

The three day Holi revelry will witness participation by more than 1,000 widows from various ashrams and shelters.
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Widows in Vrindavan assemble in the Pagal Baba ashram.

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More than 1,400kg of flower petals and 1,000kg of gulal [coloured powder] has been arranged for the celebration.
Showkat Shafi/Al Jazeera

In the temple town of Vrindavan, located in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, widows break away from centuries-old shackles and indulge in three days of Holi revelry.

Showkat Shafi/Al Jazeera

“This kind of celebrations and activities is being done to improve the condition of these widows,” said Vinita Verma, vice-president of Sulabh Hope International.
Showkat Shafi/Al Jazeera

The age-old orthodox tradition prohibits widows from celebrating festivals such as Holi, the festival of colours. These widows are expected to wear only white saris [a garment worn by Indian women] and cannot apply makeup.

Showkat Shafi/Al Jazeera

Playing with colours and flowers, dance and music were organised for the widows who took part in the Holi celebrations.
800 Vrindavan widows break the barrier for Holi

Centuries-old social barriers came crashing down when scores of Vrindavan widows took part in Holi celebrations with social activists on Sunday.

“Cutting the umbilical cord from the past is no easy task, and you can’t do that without raising eyebrows,” said social commentator Paras Nath Choudhary.

“It’s a reflection of changing times that instead of opposition, people came forward to support the social reform movement,” he said.

Adding colour to their lives: Widows celebrate Holi in Vrindavan by sprinkling colourful flowers and petals on one another. Pic/ AFP

At the five widows’ homes in Vrindavan, the ambience was infectious, the fervour and an air of victory was felt by all Holi revellers.

“This was no routine Holi celebration, it had a purpose. The effort to draw these women into the mainstream was widely appreciated,” said Shrvan Kumar Singh of Braj Mandal Heritage Conservation Society who came from Agra to join the ‘cultural revolution’.

Social activist Padmini Iyer said, “This is a clear departure from tradition. Who would have thought till a few years ago that hundreds of widows would be able to sprinkle colourful flowers and petals on one another to play Holi?”

Sulabh International recently launched a programme to provide medical facilities, job training and a monthly allowance of Rs 2,000 to every registered widow.

This initiative, at the suggestion of the Supreme Court, has fundamentally changed the lives and mindsets of the inmates of the shelter homes, Iyer said.

The Holi celebrations shall continue for four days. More than 800 widows will be part of the new initiative.

“In an effort to help widows in their social assimilation, we have organised several events,” Sulabh International founder Bindeshwar Pathak said.

“The Vrindavan Holi is an effort to free the widows from the shackles of age-old tradition. Not only will the widows play Holi, they will also participate in cultural programmes,” said Pathak.

The widows also shared food with some of the outsiders and foreigners.
India soaks in colours of Holi

Agencies | 18 hours 18 min ago

Widows play music and chant as others throw flowers as part of Holi celebrations organized by the NGO Sulabh at the Meera Sahbhagini Ashram in Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh. History was rewritten when hundreds of widows in Vrindavan, sprinkled colours and flower petals on each other and played Holi.
Widows ak taboos at India's festival of colors

A group of Indian widows has created waves by taking part in the annual Hindu festival of colors, Holi. A charity taking care of the women says it is a symbolic beginning of the end to an ingrained form of prejudice.

Thousands of years after a Hindu text described widows as "more inauspicious than all other inauspicious things," in many parts of India, after their husbands' death, Hindu women remain virtual pariahs.

http://www.dw.de/widows-break-taboos-at-indias-festival-of-colors/a-16791577
In many sections of the conservative Hindu society the Hindu widows are traditionally expected to renounce materialistic pleasure - they are barred from marrying again and taking part in many colorful celebrations or festivities. Deserted by relatives and society, many poor Hindu widows have for centuries landed in the Hindu holy city of Vrindavan, in northern India, to spend the last days of their life depending on charity.

With almost no support from the government, most Vrindavan widows survive by begging. But in recent years some non government organizations and other charities have come forward to provide support. Non-profit organization Sulabh International last year adopted five widow homes in Vrindavan after pledging that it would help the widows "live with dignity."

For many of the women, taking part in Holi once again was a moment they had longed for

‘Dreams come true’

On Sunday, 800 widows from the five homes made history by celebrating Holi - the annual Hindu festival of colors, albeit before the rest of the country. The women ended their celebration on Wednesday, the day that Holi began across India as a whole. Pictures of the exuberant widows showering flower petals and colored powder at each other and dancing to traditional Holi songs were broadcast live on national TV channels. Bindeshwar Pathak the founder of Sulabh said that his group sponsored the celebration to make the widows feel free from the "shackles of tradition".

"The widows are forbidden to look attractive. They are barred from wearing any form of color. They are made to wear only white saris and keep their head shaven. The patriarchal society shackled the widows in all ways possible," Mr Pathak said to DW.

http://www.dw.de/widows-break-taboos-at-indias-festival-of-colors/a-16701577
"For many years most of these widows were forced to live a life doomed in penury and seclusion. But after we adopted them, the basic needs of their life are fulfilled. By wanting to celebrate Holi they wanted to fulfill one of their long-cherished desires. I immediately said that our organisation must support their Holi."

Most of the widows who took part in the Holi said that it was a "dream-come-true" celebration for them.

Minati Majumder, who arrived Vrindavan from West Bengal 21 years ago, said that she never believed that as a widow she could take part and enjoy Holi before her death.

As well as celebrating color, widows sang and danced to music

"For two decades I used shut myself in our room because we knew we were widows and Holi was not for us," Minati, 68, said to DW.

"On Sunday I really enjoyed Holi at our home, I danced around... the way I had done in my childhood and when my husband was alive. I enjoyed it a lot. On Sunday I felt I was 30 years younger."

**Scenes divide opinion**

The celebration of Holi by the widows in Vrindavan has triggered mixed reactions across the country. Jogeswar Baba, a Hindu monk in Vrindaban said, widows had indulged in anti-Hindu act by celebrating Holi.

"All Hindus know that widows never play Holi. The poor widows in Vrindavan struggle to manage their livelihood. They could have never thought of celebrating the Holi on their own," Baba said to DW.

http://www.dw.de/widows-break-taboos-at-indias-festival-of-colors/a-16701577
"The organisation (of Sulabh) is spoiling the widows. It helped the widows indulge in a forbidden ritual."

However, rights activist and professor in Shillong’s North Eastern Hill University, Prasenjit Biswas, said that it was the patriarchal priestly class that distorted the Hindu scriptures and introduced the taboos that ran contrary to religious tradition.

Flower petals are collected and thrown during the festival, along with colored powder

"Debarring the widows from playing Holi smacks of sexist anti-Hindu, illiberal and orthodox prejudice amounting to violation of fundamentals rights," Prof Biswas told DW. Meanwhile, All India Progressive Women’s Association secretary, Kavita Krishnan, said that it was an indictment of modern India that the notion of widows celebrating Holi attracted so much attention.

"We welcome the celebration of the Holi by the widows in Vrindavan. We still await the day when Vrindavan will have no women set apart as "widows" - rather all women will be recognised as persons in their own right, with inalienable citizenship rights," Ms Krishnan said to DW.

DW.DE

http://www.dw.de/widows-break-taboos-at-indias-festival-of-colors/a-16701577
India's abandoned widows break taboos to join festival

By blade
Created 25/03/2013 - 20:13

Abandoned Indian widows have broken taboos and are taking part for the first time in the exuberant annual Hindu festival of colours, said a charity working to end the stigma surrounding the women.

This handout photograph released by Sulabh International on March 25, 2013, shows Indian widows celebrating the Hindu festival of Holi in Vrindavan, some 150kms south of New Delhi on March 24, 2013. Abandoned Indian widows have broken taboos and are taking part for the first time in the exuberant annual Hindu festival of colours, said a charity working to end the stigma surrounding the women.

Banished by families after their husbands’ deaths for supposedly bringing bad luck, desperately poor widows have for centuries travelled to the northern city of Vrindavan, where the Hindu god Krishna is said to have grown up, to pray and wait to die.

But this year, the widows in Vrindavan, 135 kilometres (80 miles) south of the Indian capital New Delhi, are taking part in the Hindu festival of colours known as Holi, which heralds the advent of spring, Sulabh, a civic charity, said.

"It's a Holi of hope for these women," Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of Sulabh International, which works with the widows, told AFP, saying the women would take part in more festival celebrations over the next few days.

On Sunday, hundreds of widows participated in the first day of the festivities which culminate on Wednesday, pelting coloured powder at each other, dancing to traditional Holi songs and showering each other with flowers.

"In this Holi we are celebrating we are trying to free these widows from the shackles of tradition," said Pathak.

The women, cast off by relatives who see them as a financial drain and consider even their shadows a curse, have traditionally sung hymns and begged in the pilgrimage city on the banks of the Yamuna River.

"The 'shame' of widowhood is still very strong in some traditional quarters -- they aren't allowed to celebrate, attend marriages, they're supposed to live in seclusion, shave their heads and dress in white," Pathak explained.

"It is essentially a form of life imprisonment for these widows," he said, whose plight was depicted in the 2005 Oscar-nominated film "Water".

Sulabh, which has done pioneering social work in India in sanitation and other fields, was tasked by the Supreme Court last August to work with the women after reports of widows' bodies being put in sacks and thrown in the river.

Sulabh has been providing a monthly allowance of 2,000 rupees ($40) a month to 700 widows and teaching skills but is reaching only a small number of the estimated 15,000 widows said to be living in Vrindavan.

The women who took part in Holi celebrations Sunday said the day was special.

"We used to watch men and women play Holi from the windows of our ashram (secluded community). The celebrations of the town are legendary," Pushpa Achikari told the Times of India.

India today in

WIDOWS OF UTTARAKHAND DISASTER PICK UP THE THREADS OF LIFE BINDESHWAR PATHAK, FOUNDER OF SULABH SANITATION MOVEMENT, SAID THE VILLAGE WAS ADOPTED TO ENSURE NO ONE GOES TO BED WITHOUT FOOD

IANS | Rudraprayag, December 22, 2013 | UPDATED 16:46 IST

For Dhanita Devi, 22, life took a tragic turn six months ago when the flash floods that hit the pilgrim town of Kedarnath in Uttarakhand washed away her hopes and dreams. Her husband of six years died, leaving her alone to take care of the three children.

The story is the same of Meera Tiwari, 26, who also lost her husband, a priest at the Kedarnath shrine.

But the two are not the only ones in the Deoli-Banigram village of Rudraprayag district to have lost their spouses. As many as 34 women share the same fate besides

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But the two are not the only ones in the Deoli-Banigram village of Rudraprayag district to have lost their spouses. As many as 34 women share the same fate besides
living in abject poverty, looking after their children and in some cases aged in-laws after the June 16-17 flash floods, which left scores dead and thousands homeless.

Infamously tagged “village of widows”, these women now have some ray of hope with the just launched vocational training centre by Sulabh International. The NGO supports the widows and the unemployed youth with monthly financial support of Rs 2,000 and job-oriented training.

Sulabh International Social Service Organisation adopted the village after it came to light that a large number of widows reside there and that 57 men went missing from there.

The NGO works to promote human rights, environmental sanitation, non-conventional sources of energy, waste management and social reforms through education.

Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of Sulabh Sanitation Movement, a social service organisation, said the residents were dependent entirely on Kedarnath for earning their livelihood till the natural disaster left them in disarray.

Pathak said the village was adopted to make the women self-reliant and ensure no one goes to bed without food.

“We do not want the village to be known as “Village of widows” but want it to become a “Model village”. We will take care of the widows and impart vocational training to them besides ensuring proper education to the kids,” Pathak said while launching a training programme.

The vocational centre will impart training to them in making candles, earthen lamps and wicks, sewing, providing basic education and making them computer literate. Area trainers will be taken on board to teach these women.

The training centre has 12 computers and 25 sewing equipment, to be made available to those willing to learn.

“Though this was only for the widows, it is now open to everyone in the village. As we proceed, we will add carpet weaving and beauty parlour training,” Pathak said.

“We will have a marketing channel, so these women can be self-reliant. By the end of March, training will be in full swing. We hope to get a proper place for setting all the equipment,” he said.

Dhanita Devi who doesn’t know how her husband died, said he was a porter and also owned a shop in Kedarnath.

“My husband’s shop was in the Rambada area. He used to stay in Kedarnath for six
months during the pilgrimage season. When I spoke to him on the morning of June 17, everything was fine. But it was all over by evening,” she says, as her eyes well up.

Devi, whose children are aged 4 years, 2 years and two months says she was confined to her home with her kids and mother-in-law. “I had no skills,” she said.

“Now, there is some hope. Though I will not be able to do much as I have an infant, I will definitely learn sewing. I will work from home as much as I can, and this will help me in many ways,” she added.

Agrees Tewari, who also plans to learn sewing. “If nothing else, it will help me remain busy,” she says.

Kiran Purohit, another widow, said: “I am just 23 years old and have a one-and-a-half-year-old son. I want to work and educate my child.”

She added, “I am a graduate, but never got to work as I was married early. I have basic computer knowledge and want to gain more knowledge. There are a few schools here where I can teach after the training is over,” she added.

Dr. Pathak succeeded in wiping away the tears of widows, and as one of them said: “After Sulabh’s intervention, our desire to die has changed into an yearning to live.”

Dr. Pathak guiding a widow how to operate the camera