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PHOTOGRAPHS BY REBECCA CONWAY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Widows taking part in a yoga class at the Krishna Kutir ashram, a government-run facility in Vrindavan, India. Widows in India are sometimes violently purged from their homes.

## 'They saw me as a burden'

INDIA DISPATCH  
VRINDAVAN, INDIA

In a holy city, India has built a sanctuary for abused widows

BY KAI SCHULTZ

Like thousands of other widows exiled from their homes to a city in northern India, Nirmala Maheshwari said she was abused by her family after her husband died.

"They saw me as a burden," Ms. Maheshwari whispered recently, recalling her first day at a new shelter for widows in the city, Vrindavan, as other women crowded around her bed, comforting her by squeezing her shoulders and hands.

Ms. Maheshwari said she had lost her social value in the eyes of her family, and her son and other relatives starved and beat her.

Given her lowly status at home, Ms. Maheshwari said she was shocked when she stepped into the lobby of her new home: the Krishna Kutir ashram, a government-run facility with about 1,000 beds, a freshly dug swimming pool and free food and medicine.

Hindu brides are often expected to live with their husbands' families. This

weakens ties with their own, and widowhood can spell disaster: Some of India's 40 or so million widows are violently purged from their homes each year.

But many of India's castaway widows — most of them illiterate, some married off as infants — have seen significant improvements in their quality of life over the last few years. Prodded by a flurry of public petitions and court rulings, the government and rights groups have invested tens of millions of dollars into lifting the conditions of abandoned women.

The money has gone not only into building group homes for widows, but also to funding pensions and providing work training and medical treatment.

While some of these changes are taking place across India, they are most visible in Vrindavan, about three hours' drive south of New Delhi. The city is a maze of narrow streets and regal sandstone temples. All day long, thousands of pilgrims gather to pray at the base of giant statues of deities.

It is believed that widows have gathered in the city since Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, a 16th-century Bengali social reformer, brought a group of them there to escape from suttee, a now-banned practice in which Hindu widows immolated themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres.



Kali Dasi, who is around 75, said she tried to return to her family last year and reconcile with them, but when she got there relatives drained her life savings, about \$230.

For many years, the widows in Vrindavan, which is considered the childhood home of the Hindu god Krishna, have survived by singing devotional songs in temples for a few rupees a day, and by begging for money in white saris, a signifier that color had drained from their lives.

Homelessness was common among

Vrindavan's widows. Some lived in doorways. When they died, garbage collectors would sometimes stuff their bodies into jute bags and throw them into the Yamuna River, according to local media reports.

While widows often felt they had no place else to go, the trip to Vrindavan

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# Abused and cast off, widows find a home

INDIA, FROM PAGE 1

was dreaded. Sushila Bala Dasi, 62, said she sobbed so loudly on the train ride to the city that passengers called the police.

Conditions for the widows became so dire that India's Supreme Court took notice of their plight in 2012, ruling that the government must provide them food, medical care and a sanitary place to live.

Since then, a number of government projects have been introduced, including building Krishna Kutir, or Krishna's House, which cost \$8 million and opened last August. Many of the 129 widows living there arrived alone, by train, from villages hundreds of miles away, with dirty, torn clothing. Some came with serious injuries.

At the ashram's inauguration, Maneka Gandhi, India's minister for women at the time, said that there was still far to go in improving widows' treatment but that she hoped Krishna Kutir's model could be replicated elsewhere in India.

Vinita Verma, a social worker from Sulabh International, an organization that works with widows, said she had seen a slow erosion of the conditioning that taught the women — who number at least 3,000 in Vrindavan — to view themselves as unworthy of love.

Widows who once refused to wear color are opting for garments dyed blue, burnt orange and pink.

"They used to think only in white, nothing else," Ms. Verma said. "When they were praying, they were crying. When they were cooking, they were crying. Now, they have a value."

But some widows still think of their former homes.

Kali Dasi, a frail woman around 75, said that last year she tried to reconcile with her family in the state of West Bengal, leaving Vrindavan to journey to her village. When she got there, relatives drained her life savings, about \$230. Someone bought her a train ticket back to Vrindavan after seeing her begging on the street.

"I want to go again," Ms. Dasi said. "My mind tells me one thing, but my heart doesn't agree. I am a mother."

Though new arrivals are now brought to Krishna Kutir, occupancy is still low because widows say the ashram is too far from the heart of Vrindavan, where many go to pray. From the outside, the building looks a bit like an isolated prison, with high walls and barbed wire strung along the roof to keep monkeys from breaking solar panels. The swimming pool has no water yet.

At government-run ashrams, women are given just a few hundred rupees each month, or less than \$10 — and payments are sometimes delayed by weeks.

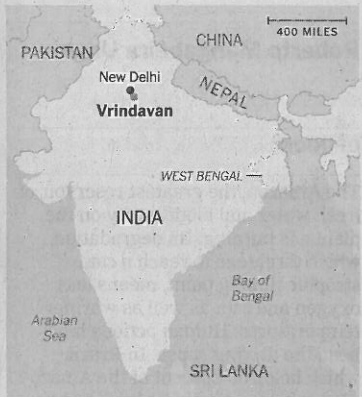
The women staying at Krishna Kutir come mostly from poor, rural villages in eastern India.

From Monday to Friday, they make decorative boxes for extra cash. Some attend literacy classes where they learn to write their names.

In group therapy sessions, they gather in circles to discuss searing family betrayals.

Niyati Das, 65, who was married at 14, said an abusive son fed her only two pieces of bread a day. Seven months ago, she arrived at Krishna Kutir with a fractured hand and foot. "Please keep me here," she kept repeating. "Even if you beat me, I will stay."

From her dormitory, Ms. Maheshwari, who had arrived with a black eye and head wounds, narrated her story.



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After her husband died a few years ago, Ms. Maheshwari lived with her son's family in a city a few hundred miles from Vrindavan. She was kept locked in a room, fed irregular meals and told she was "bad for society."

A granddaughter slammed her into walls. When she spoke on the phone with her siblings, Ms. Maheshwari's daughter-in-law kept a stick raised above her head as a threat.

Her brother eventually helped her escape, but he wouldn't house her.

When she arrived at Krishna Kutir, Ms. Maheshwari cried and begged staff members not to let her son take her away.

In recent weeks, her world has started to brighten. Last month, staff members organized a celebration for a religious festival, and Ms. Maheshwari put flowers in her hair.

The women danced in their rooms and in corridors, and near the empty swimming pool. They sang so loudly their voices reached the health clinic, where a widow resting after surgery rose and danced, too.

On that day — Ms. Maheshwari's favorite memory, she said — she looked around her new home, its halls filled with the laughter of women like her, and felt "absolutely free."

Sreyansi Singh contributed reporting.



REBECCA CONWAY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Nirmala Maheshwari, seated at center, in a craft workshop at the Krishna Kutir ashram. After her husband died, she said, her son and other relatives starved and beat her.