

Widows and Health in Rural North India

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The north Indian widow tends to be a highly marginalised person. She typically receives very little support from persons other than her children, and even when she lives with one or several of her adult sons she remains highly vulnerable to neglect. Further, her ability to engage in income-earning activities of her own is severely restricted, partly due to various patriarchal norms such as patrilineal inheritance and the division of labour by gender. The consequences of this social and economic marginalisation are manifest in poor health and high mortality levels.

This paper explores aspects of the lives of widows in north India that have a strong bearing on their health and well-being, with special attention to the issue of social support.

1

Introduction

MOTIVATION

THE total number of widows in India is extremely large—more than 23 million at the time the 1981 Census. The proportion of widows in the total female population—about 8 per cent—is comparable to that of agricultural labourers in the total male population. Among women aged 60 and above, the proportion of widows is as high as 60 per cent [*Census of India, 1981*].

In spite of this, and of the general presumption that widows are a particularly disadvantaged social group, few attempts have been made at studying the living conditions of widows in India. Widows are rarely mentioned in the literature on poverty, in public debates on social policy, or even by the women's movement. While a public outcry does occur from time to time when the social marginalisation of widows takes a sensational form, such as that of 'sati', there is a striking lack of public concern for the deprivations experienced by millions of widows on a day-to-day basis.'

This lacuna is particularly serious in view of the fact that some of these deprivations are quite severe and widespread. Poor health, evident *inter alia* in high mortality rates, is an important example. Given their large number and special vulnerability to poor health and related deprivations, widows surely deserve an important place in the study of health policy and economic development in India.

It should be added that widowhood, and the helplessness (that is often associated with it, probably have an influence on the health and well-being of many people other than widows themselves. For instance, vulnerability to widowhood in old age appears to be an important motive for high fertility among Indian women (given that surviving sons are practically the only source of social support which elderly widows can count on), with adverse consequences on the health of women and children (Dreze, 1990). Similarly, the children of widows are likely to be particularly exposed to ill-health, not only because the economic deprivation of their mothers would reflect on their own living

conditions, but also because a helpless widow often has to turn to her children's labour as a source of economic support [Dreze, 1990], with potentially devastating effects on their well-being through loss of leisure, withdrawal from schooling, and exposure to health hazards [Burra, 1986a, 1986b; Weiner, 1991]. The focus of this paper, however, will be on the well-being of widows themselves.

Even with this restricted focus, we shall not attempt to cover all the issues involved.² Rather, we will concentrate primarily on a few aspects of the lives of widows that have a particularly strong bearing on their health and well-being. The issue of social support will receive special attention.

SOURCES

The empirical material on which this paper draws comes primarily from two sources. The first is an earlier study [Dreze, 1996] of widows in three villages situated in West Bengal (Birbhum district), Gujarat (Sabarkantha district) and Uttar Pradesh (Mordabad district), respectively. These three villages were selected on grounds of prior familiarity to the author, and surveyed on several occasions between 1983 and 1989.

The second source is an ongoing study [Chen, 1991] of widows in eight villages of north India—two each in the states of Bihar (Muzaffarpur district), West Bengal (Birbhum district), Rajasthan (Udaipur district), and Uttar Pradesh (Tehri Garhwal and Dehra Dun districts). Intensive field work, including a systematic survey of all widows, was carried out in these villages in 1991. Unless stated otherwise, the figures cited in this paper (or presented in the tables) refer to this second survey, which covered a total of 262 widows.

A word should be said about contrasts across regions and between religious and caste communities. Clearly, the life of widows can vary greatly between different localities and social groups, and these diversities have to be taken into account. Our analysis focuses primarily on north India, where the study villages are all situated. For simplicity, and because each of the study villages has a large Hindu majority, we have decided to restrict the discussion to that

community. We hope to investigate the status of widows in Muslim, tribal and other non-Hindu communities in a separate study.

Within the Hindu community of north India, contrasts between different castes are extremely important, and will receive explicit attention in this paper. Inter-regional contrasts are also significant in some respects, but they are generally less pronounced, at least for the north Indian states we are concerned with, and they will receive somewhat less attention. Indeed, the diversities involved are perhaps less striking than the common background against which they can be distinguished. For instance, most Hindu communities in north India share a basic kinship system, of which patrilocality and patriliney are central elements. The system certainly does not operate in exactly the same way in different regions, but the finer differences should not divert our attention from the existence of a shared ideological framework which has very strong implications for the condition of women in general and of widows in particular. This paper concentrates more on this common background than on the subtler inter-regional differences.

FRAMEWORK

The position of widows in the north Indian society is strongly influenced by a set of practices that govern gender relations as a whole. It is important not to look at widows in isolation, and to recognise the pervasive links that exist between their specific situation and that of women in general.

A good illustration of this point concerns the system of patrilocal residence. Alienation from the parental home after marriage puts most adult women in north India in a position of vulnerability, but the consequences of patrilocal norms are particularly pronounced in the case of widows. This is because the social support which a widow receives in her husband's village after his death is, typically, extremely limited. As a result, many widows are deprived both of the opportunity to reintegrate in their parental home and of the support they need to live happily in their husband's village.

Similar remarks apply to the system of patrilineal inheritance (which is closely

related to the practice of patrilocal residence), and to the division of labour by gender. Even restrictions on remarriage, while appearing to affect widows specifically, derive from a broader kinship system that applies to all women. The connections between the deprivation of widows and the general position of women in the north Indian society will receive sustained attention in this paper.

As mentioned earlier, social support is the main focus of our enquiry. But it is important to understand how the extreme dependence of widows on social support relates, in the first place, to the restrictions they experience in the domains of (1) residence; (2) inheritance, (3) remarriage, and (4) employment. This background will be discussed in some detail before we turn to the issue of social support specifically.

OUTLINE

The outline of the paper is as follows. In the next section, we discuss available information on the health of widows in rural north India. More empirical evidence is needed to firmly establish the facts, but the indications that already exist on this question do point to high rates of morbidity and mortality among widows.

Section III examines several basic causes of the vulnerability and dependence of widows in rural north India. Particular attention is paid to the restrictions they experience in the spheres of residence, inheritance, remarriage and employment.

In Section IV we investigate what kind of social support widows receive from relatives and the community. Living arrangements, inter-household transfers and intra-household distribution are the main ingredients of our analysis. The overwhelming dependence of widows on their sons clearly emerges, confirming the results of earlier studies.

TABLE I: PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF SAMPLE WIDOWS BY MORTALITY RISK

Mortality Risk	Per Cent
(1) Low mortality risk	
Widows heading households with adult sons	25
(2) Medium mortality risk	
Widows heading households without adult sons	10
Widows living in households headed by adult sons	40
(3) High mortality risk	
Widows living in households headed by 'others'	13
Widows living alone	12
Total	100

Source: Chen [1991]. This Table assumes the same ranking of mortality risks as that found by Rahman and Menken [1990] for rural Bangladesh. The proportion of widows in different groups is derived from the Chen [1991] sample

In Section V the contrasts in the predicament of widows associated with factors such as caste, class, age or area of residence are briefly illustrated with reference to the particular issue of caste.

Section VI offers some concluding thoughts on the implications of our findings for action.

II

Widowhood and Health³

This section examines available indications (direct and indirect) of the health status of widows in rural north India. Given the general dearth of information on this subject, indirect evidence will include the findings of studies carried out in other parts of south Asia- The relevance of these findings should be cautiously considered, given the possibility of sharp regional contrasts.

ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Several authors have argued that widowhood in south Asia tends to be associated with economic deprivation (Dreze, 1990; Rahman, 199 : Rahman and Menken, 1990; Cain, 1981,1983,1983,1986; Caldwell et al, 1988). Rahman [1990] compares the economic decline of widows and widowers in rural Bangladesh, and finds a much greater decline in the economic status of widows compared with Widowers. The reason, he argues, is that for women access to resources is much more dependent on marital status and living arrangements than is the case for men.

Cain [1981] analyses the impact of widowhood on the economic status of women in one village of Bangladesh and three villages of India.⁴ He focuses on women who become widows under unfavourable circumstances: at an early stage in their life cycle, or without surviving male offspring. The acquisition or loss of land is taken as a criterion of economic mobility. While the author finds that the widows in the Bangladesh village suffered greater loss of land than those in the Indian villages, he also concludes that all women widowed under unfavourable circumstances are vulnerable to economic decline.

Dreze [1990], examining National Sample Survey data for the state of Karnataka [1977-78], finds that households with a widow have somewhat lower per capita expenditure levels than households without a widow. While the difference is not particularly striking if all widow-inclusive households are taken together, some sub-groups within this broad category do appear to experience much higher-than-average levels of poverty. This applies particularly to households consisting of a widow and her unmarried children, and especially when the eldest son is still quite young.

Further findings based on a small sample of widows in Palanpur (a village in Uttar Pradesh), reported in the same study, con-

firm these results, in this village, nuclear households headed by a widow are observed to experience a dramatic decline in per capita income after the death of the husband.

Taken as a whole, these studies have clearly brought out the high vulnerability of particular groups of widows, especially those heading households without adult male. The economic evidence, however, tells us very little about the living conditions of the majority of widows who live as dependents in households headed by adult males. This is partly because the standard economic variables fail to capture intra-household inequalities, which may be crucial in this context.⁵ The fact that the focus of this enquiry needs to be squarely on the individual, rather than on the household, is one important reason for supplementing economic evidence with the use of health indicators such as mortality rates.

MORTALITY RATES

One would expect economic deprivation to be reflected in high morbidity and mortality rates among widows, compared with married women in the same age groups. To our knowledge, this hypothesis has not been tested in the case of India itself. However, a recent study of differential mortality rates among women of different marital status in Bangladesh [Rahman and Menken, 1990; Rahman, 1990] does bring out the expected pattern.

This study, based on data from the Matlab surveillance area in rural Bangladesh for the period 1974-1982, explores the impact of widowhood on old-age female mortality. In the sample population, the mortality rate for widowed women aged 45 and above was as high as 5.29 per 100 person-years, compared with 1.87 for currently-married women [Rahman and Menken, 1990]. Further, the excess mortality risk associated with widowhood was found to be higher for women than for men at most ages, and the decline in life expectancy associated with widowhood was greater for women than for men.

The same study also explores the relative mortality rates of widows living in various types of households (the percentage distribution of these household types in our own north Indian sample is indicated in Table I). In this respect, the most significant variables proved to be the presence or absence of adult sons, and the identity of the household head. The findings indicate that, in terms of relative mortality risk, widows who live alone and widows who live in households headed by individuals other than their sons or themselves have the highest mortality risks amongst all widows. On the other hand, widows who head households that include an adult son have the lowest mortality risks. The intermediate group includes widows who head multi-person households without adult sons, headed by their sons (Rahman and Menken, 1990). This pattern

corresponds quite closely to what one would expect given the fact, discussed further in this paper, that widows overwhelmingly depend on their own sons for their survival,

REGIONAL CONTRASTS

There are striking heterogeneities in the incidence of widowhood in different parts of India. Some of the relevant inter-state contrasts are brought out in Tables 2 and 3. It can be easily seen that the proportion of widows in the rural female population tends to be much higher than average in the southern states (Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and to a lesser extent Kerala). The incidence of widowhood is comparatively low in the northern region, especially in the north-west.⁶ The ratio of widows to widowers follows a similar regional pattern, taking high values (between 3.9 and 7.7) in the southern states, and much lower values (between 1.4 and 1.7) in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Jammu and Kashmir. This broad north-south contrast, with a particularly sharp divergence between the south and the north-west, deserves further scrutiny.⁷

In some extent, these regional contrasts reflect different patterns of life expectancies, especially the fact that the survival advantages of adult women *vis-a-vis* adult men are stronger in the southern states. With a life expectancy in the early 40s, the average woman in Uttar Pradesh is comparatively well 'protected' from the prospect of widowhood. The same does not apply in Kerala, where women live on average 24 years longer than their sisters in Uttar Pradesh, and where women outlive men by a long margin.⁸

Regional differences in gender-specific survival chances, however, only explain a part of the observed north-south contrast in the incidence of widowhood. Indeed, the incidence of widowhood appears to be considerably higher in the south than in the north even *within given age groups*. As can be seen from Table 3, up to the age of about 60 the risk of being a widow is roughly twice as high for a woman of a given age in the south as for a woman of the same age in the north-west. This obviously cannot be explained by invoking the shorter life expectancies of men and women in the latter region (quite the contrary, since a shorter life expectancy for men tends to *increase* the risk of widowhood for women of a given age).

The fact that the difference between the mean age at marriage of men and women is comparatively large in the south does contribute to higher rates of widowhood in all age groups for that region. But this can only account for a small part of the observed regional contrast since, in fact, age differentials at marriage in south India are only about one year larger than in India as a whole, and about two years larger than in the north-west (Table 2).

A more promising explanation is that remarriage rates are lower in the south than

in the north. There is, to fact, some empirical evidence in favour of this hypothesis.⁹ It is, nevertheless, rather doubtful that lower rates of remarriage satisfactorily explain the much

higher incidence of widowhood in the south. This is because, as will be discussed in section 3.3, remarriage rates are quite low even in the north. Also, we have to remember

TABLE 2: WIDOWS IN RURAL INDIA. 1981—INTER-STATE CONTRASTS

State	Widows as Percentage of Rural Female Population	Female-Male Ratio ^a	Ratio of Widows to Widowers in Rural Population ^b	Proportion of Rural Indian Widows Living in the State (Percentage)	Average Age Differential at Marriage ^c (Years)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Andhra Pradesh	10.5	975	4.3	10.5	5.7
Tamil Nadu	10.4	977	3.9	8.2	5.8
Karnataka	9.9	963	4.6	6.4	6.7
West Bengal	9.5	911	6.0	9.1	6.5
Maharashtra	9.3	937	4.4	9.3	5.4
Orissa	9.2	981	3.7	5.3	5.1
Kerala	8.9	1032	7.7	4.6	5.5
Madhya Pradesh	8.0	941	2.6	8.0	4.0
Himachal Pradesh	7.7	973	2.5	0.8	4.7
Bihar	7.5	946	2.5	11.1	4.9
Rajasthan	7.2	919	2.4	4.6	4.2
Gujarat	7.0	942	2.9	4.0	3.6
Uttar Pradesh	6.5	885	1.4	13.8	4.3
Jammu and Kashmir	5.7	892	1.4	0.6	5.0
Punjab	5.5	879	1.6	1.5	3.3
Haryana	4.9	870	1.5	1.1	3.9
India ^d	8.2	934	2.9	100.0	5.0

^a Number of females per 1000 males (rural and urban areas combined).

^b Calculated as: (rural female-male ratio) x [(proportion of widows in the rural female population)/(proportion of widowers in the rural male population)]. The rural female-male ratios have been calculated from Verma [1988 Table 3]

^c Difference between the mean age at marriage of males and females (rural and urban areas combined).

^d Excluding Assam, where the 1981 Census was not conducted.

Source: Dreze (1990). Derived from *Census of India 1981*, and Verma (1988), Tables 5 and 28. The figures reported in Verma [1988] are also based on the 1981 Census.

TABLE 3: INCIDENCE OF WIDOWHOOD IN DIFFERENT AGE-GROUPS AND REGIONS, 1981

Age Group	Widows as Percentage of All Rural Females in the Corresponding Age Group and Region				
	North-West	Central West	East	South	All India ^a
0-9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0 (0.0)
10-14	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.03 (0.03)
15-19	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.2 (0.1)
20-24	0.5	0.7	0.9	0.9	0.7 (0.5)
25-29	1.0	1.5	2.0	2.0	1.6 (1.0)
30-34	2.1	2.9	3.6	4.3	3.2 (1.6)
35-39	3.6	5.0	6.3	7.0	5.5 (2.3)
40-44	7.9	9.6	12.3	13.7	10.8 (3.8)
45-49	10.0	14.8	18.1	19.8	15.5 (5.0)
50-54	24.1	27.5	32.2	34.2	29.4 (8.0)
55-59	20.1	30.6	32.7	40.6	30.5 (9.8)
60-64	48.7	55.3	58.1	61.3	55.6 (14.9)
65-69	44.0	59.8	61.5	66.8	57.6 (17.8)
70+	70.5	78.4	78.3	83.4	77.2 (27.8)
All ages	6.5	8.3	8.5	10.0	8.2 (2.7)

^a In brackets, the corresponding figures for males.

Source: Dreze [1990]. Calculated from *Census of India 1981*, Part IV-A, Social and Cultural Tables, Table C-1 (the 'all-India' column, also based on the 1981 Census, is taken from Verma [1988: 87]). The different regions have been defined as follows. North West: Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh; Central West: Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh; East: Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal; South: Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu. This regional division is based on Agarwal [1988].

that, insofar as they do occur, remarriages in the north are overwhelmingly concentrated in the younger age groups (say, below 30). Thus, if differential remarriage rates were the main factor behind the observed regional patterns, one would expect the absolute difference between the age-specific incidence of widowhood in the south and in, say, the north-west to stop widening beyond these age groups. But in fact, this difference continues to increase well beyond age groups within which remarriage rates would become negligible (Table 3).

It seems hard to explain the north-south contrast without invoking the further hypothesis that the widows of north India, and particularly those living in the north-west, have particularly *low survival chances*. Other things being equal, this would reduce the proportion of widows in the female population, particularly in the older age groups.

This hypothesis fits well with the results reported earlier for Bangladesh, a region which, as far as gender relations are concerned, is probably much closer to north India than either regions are to south India. It also points to the possible role played by social neglect in generating high mortality rates among widows in north India. The relatively low survival chances of *women vis-a-vis* men in north India have been linked in earlier studies with various forms of anti-female discrimination, and it is not surprising that this region should also be that where the special disadvantages of *widows* appear to be particularly acute. Indeed, as will be argued later in this paper, the factors that contribute to the deprivation of widows are closely linked with more general causes of female disadvantage in north India.

III

Sources of Vulnerability

This section discusses selected aspects of the lives of widows which, in our judgment, deserves to be considered as basic causes of their vulnerability. Special attention will be given to the restrictions that widows experience in the domains of (1) residence, (2) inheritance, (3) remarriage, and (4) employment

PATRILOCALITY

The system of patrilocal residence and patrilineal inheritance, which has the effect of isolating and dispossessing women, is a fundamental source of gender inequalities in rural north India. It also plays a crucial part in the deprivation of widows. Although both elements of this system are closely interrelated, we will discuss patrilocal residence first, and take up the question of patrilineal inheritance in the next sub-section.¹⁰

Patrilocality in the narrow sense refers to the norm, prevalent in most Hindu communities of north India, according to which a woman has to leave her parental home at

the time of marriage to join her husband in his own village.¹¹ In the broader sense used in this paper, patrilocality also refers to the drastic alienation from her parental family experienced by a married woman after her 'transfer' to her husband's family.

Indeed, the departure of a married woman to her husband's home is not simply an innocuous change of residence—it marks a dramatic and irreversible change in her whole life. Once she has crossed that bridge, she literally becomes the property of her in-laws' family. Her intimate links with her parental home and its familiar surroundings are reduced to the occasional visit. In her new 'home', the life of the young bride is one of hard work and subordination, and possibly also of seclusion or even harassment.

The transfer of a young bride from her father's patrilocal to her husband's patrilocal is a crucial event not only in her emotional life but also from the point of view of her legal and social status. In particular, her customary rights to property undergo drastic change. Until her marriage and transfer takes place, a girl's customary rights are similar to those of her brothers. But after her transfer to her husband's village, a woman loses her status as coparcener and forgoes her right of inheritance in her natal home (in the marriage ceremony of some communities, this break with the father's patrilocal is symbolised by the breaking of a twig). A married woman only retains certain limited and residual rights in her parental home: she is entitled to receive gifts on specific occasions from her parents and, after their death, from her brothers; and she is entitled to visit her natal home on ceremonial and other occasions [Madan, 1989].

The practice of patrilocal residence is of profound significance for widows. It means that after losing their husband, they have very little freedom to 'return' to their parental home (or to their brothers). They are expected to remain in their husband's village, and in most cases they do so (unless they are childless or remarry). In our sample, the vast majority of widows (85 per cent) continued to live in their deceased husband's village after his death, whether or not he owned land or other property (Table 4).¹²

In most cases, widows actually continue to live in their deceased husband's home. However, outside levirate unions (which are practised only in certain communities), widows are unlikely to share a common hearth with their husband's relatives. In the study villages, only thirteen widows out of 262 reported living in households headed by an in-law, either parent-in-law or brother-in-law. Thus, while most widows continue to live in close proximity to their in-laws (e.g. in adjacent huts or rooms), very few share a common hearth with them; and, as will be discussed in Section IV, very few receive substantial support from their deceased husband's relatives. Most widows are deprived

both of the freedom to leave their husband's village and of the support they need to live 'here happily.'

PATRILOCAL INHERITANCE

The inheritance rights of widows in north India will be discussed here with specific attention to *land*. A comprehensive treatment of this subject would have to distinguish between (1) traditional law, (2) modern law, and (3) actual practice. For simplicity, we shall concentrate mainly on the third notion, as it applies in the study villages. Another useful distinction to make is that between the inheritance rights of women (1) as daughters, assuming (for simplicity) the demise of both parents, and (2) as widows, after the loss of their husband.¹³

Under the north Indian system of patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal residence, women *as daughters* are entitled to a share of their father's property until they get married. But when she joins her husband's village at the time of her marriage, a daughter loses her status as a coparcener in her natal household. After that, she can reclaim her rights of inheritance to her father's property only under very exceptional circumstances. In the study villages, only 15 widows (6 per cent) had retained or reclaimed some inheritance rights in their parental village.

If a daughter does not change residence at marriage, and her husband comes to live with her in her own village, she retains her rights as a coparcener in her natal home. The consequence of this reversal of the normal rule of residence is that a woman acquires rights of ownership and disposal in her natal household similar to those of her brothers (if any). But this pattern is quite exceptional—it usually occurs only when the parents of the bride have no sons.¹⁴

As widows, women often do exercise use rights (if not property rights) over their husband's share of the family land, and their entitlements are taken into account in the event of partition. For instance, a childless widow who remains in her husband's village is usually entitled to her husband's share of the family land, although she does not have

TABLE-4: WIDOWS BY VILLAGE OF RESIDENCY AFTER HUSBANDS DEATH

Village of Residence	Widows	
	No	Per Cent
Same village		
Deceased husbands	222	85
Parental	16	6
Other	4	2
Subtotal	242	93
Different village		
Deceased husbands	2	1
Parental	12	5
Other	6	2
Subtotal	20	8
Total	262	100

Source: Chen [1991]

the right to sell it or gift it away. After her death, her share reverts to her husband's family. If a widow has sons, she can exercise use rights over her husband's share of the land as a trustee or guardian until her sons mature. After growing up, her sons are likely to partition the land among themselves, possibly before their mother's death. In such situations, a widow's relations with her sons determines whether or not she continues to exercise a use right over part of the family land.

Limited as they are, these inheritance rights are often violated in practice. Twenty per cent of the study widows reported serious conflicts with their in-laws, and the majority of these were conflicts with their brothers-in-law over land. These conflicts are primarily of two types: the brothers-in-law insist on sharecropping the widow's land themselves, or they attempt to deprive her of her rightful share of the land (often rationalising their claim by arguing that they spent money on her husband's funeral or on her children's maintenance). In a few extreme cases, in order to gain control over her share of land, the brothers-in-law force the widow to leave the village, or even have her murdered.

REMARRIAGE PRACTICES

Two stereotypes persist about widow remarriage in India. The first, very widespread until recently, is that widow remarriage is 'prohibited' in Hindu society. The second, currently more influential in the scientific literature, is that widow remarriage is widely practised. Reality lies somewhere between these two extreme views: while most castes (except the higher-ranked ones) do not 'prohibit' widow remarriage, actual remarriage only takes place in special circumstances.¹⁹

In this connection, a crucial distinction has to be made between childless widows and widowed mothers. In most communities, the remarriage of a childless widow is perceived as a fairly straightforward affair.¹⁶ Except in the case of a leviratic union, the remarriage arrangements are the responsibility of the father and brothers of the concerned widow. The second husband is usually a widower, a divorcee, an impoverished bachelor, or a currently-married man who wishes to take a second wife (Table 5 for some relevant information from the study villages). The marriage ceremony is simple and informal.¹⁷ On remarrying and leaving the village of her deceased husband, a childless widow loses her entitlement to his share of the land.

Among widowed mothers, remarriage tends to be rare. The primary reasons cited by widowed mothers for not remarrying are that they do not want more children and that they doubt whether a new husband will take good care of the children they already have (Table 6).¹⁸ Another frequently-cited reason is the wish to retain claim on the deceased

husband's land (bearing in mind that widows lose this claim on remarriage). Other factors that were mentioned by widowed mothers in the study villages include: the possibility of harsh treatment of the widow herself by the second husband's own children (bearing in mind that a widow typically marries a widower who is also likely to be a father); the ambiguous status of a widow's children by her second husband (given that both she and he may have children from previous marriages); the fact that only widows aged below 40 years or so are considered eligible for remarriage; and uncertainty about whether a new marriage will bring happiness or security. Even among castes which have liberal attitudes *vis-a-vis* widow remarriage, few widowed mothers manage to overcome these obstacles and fears.

To conclude, the basic pattern in most communities is that most childless widows remarry, while most widowed mothers do not remarry. The overall probability that a widow will remarry is quite low, perhaps of the order of 15 to 20 per cent (Dreze, 1990). In the eight study villages, only 13 per cent of ever-widowed women were found to have remarried.

The extent to which low rates of remarriage reflect a deliberate choice on the part of widows themselves, rather than external restrictions or pressures, is difficult to determine. In fact, the distinction between voluntary rejection and external obstruction is itself not clear-cut, since the aspiration of widows to remarry may strongly depend on the opportunities they face, the support they can anticipate, and the 'conditioning' they have received. For our purposes, however, what matters is to note that remarriage is not a viable refuge for the majority of widows who have children at the time of losing their husband.

EMPLOYMENT RESTRICTIONS

One of the prominent elements of the basic patriarchal system of north India is a division of labour by gender. Under this division, certain types of work are designated as male or female. For example, ploughing is almost exclusively a male task, whereas drying and storing grain are typically female tasks. Moreover, certain spheres of economic activity are designated as male or female. In many communities, for instance, the homestead or private sphere is predominantly female; the public sphere of markets, roads and towns is predominantly male; and the intermediate sphere of fields and villages is both male and female.

This shared patriarchal system is interwoven with a hierarchical social structure which considers the lifestyle of women as an important indicator of the status of different groups. This social-status hierarchy further restricts women's employment, insofar as an important symbol of a household's position in this hierarchy is the type of work its women are allowed to do.

Aside from the general restrictions

resulting from this interaction between the social-status hierarchy and the division of labour by gender, widows face specific difficulties in seeking gainful employment opportunities. These include: lack of access to indivisible productive assets owned by the deceased husband's family (e.g., wells, ploughs and bullocks); weak bargaining power *vis-a-vis* male partners in economic transactions; frequent absence of a literate member in the household; limited access to institutional credit; and, particularly in the case of widows living with young children, the burden of domestic work.¹⁹

Tables 7 and 8 present information on the primary occupations of households with at least one widow in the study villages. The first of these two tables contrasts their current occupations with their occupations prior to the event of widowhood, while Table 8 distinguishes between households with and without adult males. The most noticeable feature in Table 7 is the decline of various forms of self-employment after widowhood (except for domestic services), and, correspondingly, the increased reliance on wage employment. From Table 8, it can also be seen that salaried work (the more attractive form of wage employment) is predominantly an activity of households with adult males. By contrast, most households

TABLE 5: REMARRIED WIDOWS BY MARITAL STATUS OF NEW HUSBAND

Marital Status	Number and Percentage of Widows	
	No	Per Cent
Widowed	26	72
Divorced	2	6
Separated	0	0
Currently married	2	6
Never married	3	8
Other	3	8
Total	36	100

Source: Chen [1991].

TABLE 6: CURRENT WIDOWS BY REASON FOR NOT REMARRYING

Reason	Number and Percentage of Widows Citing Reason	
	No	Per Cent
No more children wanted	59	42
Child care concerns	37	26
To claim property	34	24
Societal pressure	2	1
Dislike of suitor	1	1
Other	65	46
Total	198	(100)

Sure: 121 current widows were considered 'too old' to remarry. The remaining 141 cited these reasons for not marrying (some widows gave several reasons). The reasons in the 'other' category include a caste ban on remarriage.

Source: Chen [1991].

with 'domestic work' as a primary occupation are households without an adult male

The extent of remunerative self-employment among widows living in households without an adult male is strikingly restricted. This finding, which confirms the results of an earlier study of north Indian widows [Dreze, 1990], illustrates the employment restrictions that result from the division of labour by gender and related social norms as well as from the disadvantages that widows face as participants in the rural economy.

IV

Social Isolation of Widows

The restrictions on residence, ownership, remarriage and employment examined in the preceding section put north Indian widows in a situation of acute dependence on economic support from others. In the absence of effective forms of state-based social security measures, community support is the crucial source of potential assistance.

The extent and nature of community support can be analysed in terms of three broad determinants: (1) living arrangements (the partitioning of the community into different households); (2) inter-household transfers; land (3) intra-household distribution. We need to consider, in other words, why widows live with particular persons (e.g., whether they live with their parents, or with their in-laws, or on their own), what kind of support the household they live in might receive from other households, and what treatment a widow receives within her (Own household. Despite their obvious inter-relations, these three issues can usefully be considered separately.

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

A number of interesting regularities can be discerned in available studies of the living arrangements of widows in rural north India.²⁰ One of the clearest and most important findings is the overwhelming dependence of widows on themselves and their own sons. More precisely, the proportion of widows who live in households headed either by themselves or by one of their sons is well over 80 per cent in most samples. The vast majority of these households belong to one of three types: single widows, 'nuclear' households (widows living with their unmarried children), and 'filial' households (defined as households consisting of a widow, at least one of her married sons, and possibly other persons). Very few widows live with their in-laws, daughters, Barents, brothers or indeed any relatives other than their own children and, possibly, the nuclear families of their married sons. As can be seen from Table 9, these common patterns clearly emerge in our own sample. In this case, the proportion of widows living in households headed by themselves or one of their sons is as high as 87 per cent; 204 out of these 228

households are of the 'single', 'nuclear' or 'filial' type. The last category accounts for nearly two-thirds of all the sample widows.

Widows living alone deserve particular attention. Earlier studies suggest that the proportion of widows in that situation varies in great deal between different communities, but may be around 10 per cent on average for rural north India [Dreze, 1990]. The proportion found in the study villages is very close to that figure—about 10 per cent. Most but not all of the widows who live alone do not have any sons. This indicates that widows seldom live alone by choice (despite having sons who are willing to look after them), or because their sons have abandoned them.

These consistent findings on living arrangements clearly invalidate the notion that a widow is typically reintegrated in the household of her in-laws, parents or other relatives. The consequences of this residential isolation might not be so severe if widows could count on getting regular support from their relatives through inter-household transfers. There is, however, little evidence of substantial support in that form, as will be seen in the next sub-section.

INTER-HOUSEHOLD TRANSFERS

The dichotomy between 'joint' and 'separate' living arrangements is a sharp one in rural north India. A group of people can either live 'together in the same household'

(sajhe' in Hindi, 'bhega' in Gujarati, 'eotro' in Bengali), in which case the norm is that they should pool all their resources, or they can live 'separately' ('nyare' in Hindi, 'juda' in Gujarati, 'prithok' in Bengali), in which case solidarity gives way to mutual independence or even rivalry. Separate households, even within kin-based networks, tend to maintain a relationship of 'balanced reciprocity', involving a strict mental accounting of the goods and services that flow from one household to another and a firm expectation that every transfer will be reciprocated at some stage. Except for some specific flows of goods and services tightly regulated by social norms (e.g., ritual gifts from brother to sister, or from a married woman's family to her in-laws), unreciprocated transfers between separate households are a rare occurrence.

Our observations in the study villages suggest that this general pattern applies even to widows, though perhaps in a somewhat less stringent form. Table 10 provides information on different types of social support reported by widows in these villages.²¹ Since a small minority of widows would be living in the same household as the person from whom support is mentioned in this table, the actual extent of inter-household transfers is somewhat more restricted than these figures suggest. One should also remember that each respondent may have mentioned more than one source or form of support. Bear-

TABLE 7: PRIMARY OCCUPATIONS OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH WIDOWS, BEFORE WIDOWHOOD AND AT THE TIME OF INTERVIEW, 1990

Primary Occupation	Number and Percentage of Households				
	Before Widowhood		1990		Difference (No)
	No	Per Cent	No	Per Cent	
Wage labour	2	20	63	24	+11
Salaried work	0	0	44	17	+44
Cultivation	119	45	105	40	-14
Animal husbandry	21	8	16	6	-5
Caste services	13	5	7	3	-6
Self-employment	16	6	12	5	-4
Domestic services	0	0	10	4	+10
Artisan production	0	0	2	1	+2
Trade	3	1	3	1	0
Total	262	100	262	100	0

Source: Chen (1991).

TABLE 8: PRIMARY OCCUPATIONS OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH WIDOWS, WITH OR WITHOUT ADULT MALES

Primary Occupation	With Adult Male		Without Adult Male	
	No	Per Cent	No	Per Cent
Wage labour	53	25	10	19
Salaried work	40	19	4	8
Cultivation	79	38	26	49
Animal husbandry	15	7	1	2
Caste services	5	2	2	4
Self-employment	10	5	2	4
Domestic work	2	1	8	15
Artisan production	2	1	0	0
Trade	3	1	0	0
Total	209	100	53	100

Source: Chen [1991].

ing this in mind, the extent of inter-household transfers appears to be quite limited. Most forms of support are reported by up to 5 per cent of widows in the case of support from parents or in-laws, and up to 10 per cent in the case of support from brothers and daughters. The main exception is that of gifts from brothers and daughters, reported by nearly 25 per cent of all widows. Even from brothers and daughters, however, support tends to be given either on ritual occasions or in times of crisis (particularly illness). Economic assistance on a sustained basis is exceptional.

On the basis of informal discussions with the respondents, a little more can be said about the relationships that tend to exist between a widow and various relatives.

In-Laws

Most widows in our sample expected very little support from their in-laws (Table 10 confirms that support from this source is particularly rare). In fact, in-laws were quite often perceived as a source of harassment rather than of support. Common forms of harassment include sexual demands and attempts to deprive a widow of her rightful share of the land. Similar conclusions regarding the strained relationship between a widow and her in-laws have been reached in many other studies.²²

The fact that most widows live separately from their in-laws, receive very little support from them in the form of inter-household transfers, and perceive them primarily as a potential source of harassment, contradicts the common belief that the Indian widow continues to be assimilated in her husband's family after his death.²³ In some communities, continued assimilation sometimes does occur in the form of a leviratic union, a practice that appears to be viewed with repulsion by widows themselves [Dreze, 1990]. Barring this unattractive option, however, the general rule seems to be that in-laws cannot be counted on as a source of support. The notion that the 'joint family' provides protection to widows in rural India is little more than a myth.

Parents and Brothers

A widow's relationship with her parents and brothers is a little more complex. On the one hand, the practice of patrilocal residence (discussed in Section III) severs most ties between a woman and her parental home. On the other hand, a married woman does not completely cease to be a daughter or a sister. Besides the bonds of personal affection and sentiment (sometimes strengthened, rather than lessened, by forced separation), her ties with her natal home are supported by certain residual rights. She is entitled to visit her parental home, to be present at various ritual and ceremonial occasions, to move to her natal home if taken ill or at the time of delivering a child, and to receive gifts. In the early years of a woman's married life, these ties are particularly strong. But as her children grow up,

and as her parents and parents-in-law die, these ties with her natal home gradually weaken [Madan 1989].

A woman's relationship with her brothers, however, remains important long after her marriage. In her position as a father's sister, she has important ceremonial roles in the lives of her brother's children. Her brother, in turn, in his role as the mother's brother, has important ceremonial roles to play in the lives of her children.

Further, a daughter, if widowed, is widely perceived to be entitled, in principle, to maintenance in her natal home in the case where she is childless and to support if she is needy.²⁴ Although few widows return to live in their natal home, and while their parents and brothers often feel that their own poverty stands in the way of the traditional norms of support, many widows do seek some help from parents and especially brothers. If a widow is particularly needy (e.g., if she has no adult sons), her brother(s) may send her regular remittances. More commonly, widows receive the occasional gift, or an annual gift (e.g., on the occasion of diwali) from their brothers. If parents are alive and able to help, they may also be an appreciable source of support, particularly in times of crisis.

Daughters

In north India, social norms severely restrict the contact between parents and daughters. Parents, even if widowed, are not supposed to seek help from married daughters once they have joined their husband's patriline.

In the course of our survey, we had many occasions to observe the continuing strength of these traditional norms. We also found, however, that daughters often did support their widowed mothers in ways that do not conflict with these norms. For instance, even if they are not able (for practical or cultural reasons) to provide material support in cash or in kind, many daughters who live close enough to their widowed mothers provide them with various services such as caring for them when they are ill, washing their hair or clothes, or helping them to maintain or repair their homes. As Table 10 indicates, a

daughter is more likely to care for a widowed mother during her illness than any other relative.

Others

Many widows are able to negotiate exchanges in kind (e.g., a small amount of food) from caste neighbours. If she works for, or is the client of, a wealthy patron, a widow may receive small gifts on a regular basis. If she is on good terms with an affluent neighbour, she may also receive the odd interest-free loan. Most of the time, however, a widow's household receives little help from the village community, and has to fend for itself like any other.

INTRA-HOUSEHOLD DISTRIBUTION

According to the traditional norms of Hindu society, the life of a widow is supposed to be austere in the extreme—even if she belongs to an affluent household. Fortunately, the traditional austerities have lost much of their relevance for the majority of north Indian widows, even though they can still be encountered among the 'higher' castes. However, the needs of a dependent widow remain severely neglected in many households.

It is plausible that intra-household inequalities play an important part in the causation of ill-health and high mortality among widows. In fact, expenditure and mortality data provide some indirect evidence in support of this hypothesis. On the one hand, taking together *all* households with a widow, we find that per capita expenditure levels for this group are not significantly lower than for households without a widow.²⁵ On the other hand, mortality levels among widows have been found to be up to three times as high as those of married women in the same age groups (see Section II). These two observations would be difficult to reconcile with the notion that the health status of a widow reflects the economic status of the household she lives in. The most straightforward interpretation of these findings, in fact, is that the extent to which a woman's needs are met in a household with a given level of per

TABLE 9: DISTRIBUTION OF WIDOWS BY TYPE OF HOUSEHOLD AND IDENTITY OF HOUSEHOLD HEAD

Household Type	Identity of Household Head							
	Self		Son(s)		Other		Total	
	No	Per Cent	No	Per Cent	No	Per Cent	No	Per Cent
Single	31	12	0	0	0	0	31	12
Nuclear	3	1	0	0	0	0	3	1
Filial	65	25	105	40	0	0	170	65
Other	24	9	0	0	34	13	58	22
All types	123	47	105	40	34	13	262	100

Note: Single - widow living alone.
 Nuclear - widow plus children *except* adult sons.
 Filial = widow plus adult son(s), and any other members.
 Other - residual category.

Source: Chen [1991]. See Dreze (1990) for further discussion of these definitions of household types.

capita expenditure is much lower when she is a widow than when she is a married woman.²⁶

It might be added that, as was discussed in Section II, the mortality study [Rahman and Menken, 1990] finds much lower mortality rates among widows who are reported to be the 'head' of the household than among widows living as dependents in other households of a similar type (Table 1). This finding, too, is consistent with the notion (Table 1). This finding, too, is consistent with the notion that intra-household inequalities are an important cause of high mortality rates among widows.

The literature on intra-household inequalities in rural India has, so far, concentrated mainly on the question of male-female divisions, especially those between young boys and girls. In this context, three possible determinants of intra-household inequalities have been widely discussed: (1) the 'return' which the decision-maker(s) might expect to obtain from allocating consumption to different individuals in the household; (2) the perception of what different members of the household 'deserve' to receive; and (3) the 'bargaining power' possessed by different household members engaged in a relation of co-operative conflict.²⁷

Whether return, desert or bargaining power (or a combination of these) is the relevant determinant of household inequalities, one would not expect a dependent widow to receive a favourable treatment within the household. The return a household head might hope to obtain from better treatment of a widow would, at best, take the form of improved domestic services such as child care. The perception of what a widow deserves is not likely to be very high when she is seen as an 'unproductive' dependent. And the bargaining power of a widow who lives in a situation of extreme dependence on support from other household members would also be typically very low. In these circumstances, the temptation for those who maintain a dependent widow is to confine their support to what is required by the unexact demands of 'duty'.

The basic problem is not only that a widow often depends on other household members to survive, but also that these other household members *do not depend on her* for anything essential. Each of the three approaches mentioned above suggests that a widow who can contribute something important to the household (e.g. a widow who owns land, or who earns a pension) will be much less exposed to neglect than a widow who is regarded as unproductive. This observation implies, *inter alia*, that more secure property rights could play an important role in enhancing the living conditions of widows in rural India.²⁸ We shall return to this point in the concluding section.

These broad remarks only scratch the surface of the problem of intra-household treatment of widows, and we should not con-

clude without warning against the simplifications they have involved. Ultimately, the treatment a widow receives is the outcome of a decisionmaking process (or co-operative conflict) (hat is a good deal more complex than with the familiar male-female inequalities. When a widow lives with one of her married sons, for instance, the relationships between the widow and her son, between her son and his wife, and between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law would all enter into the equation. These relationships are affected by factors such as duty, affection, and authority, in a way that need not fit easily into the familiar analyses based on return, desert or bargaining power. The outcome can be anything between the widowed mother taking the role of a tyrannical household head to her being at the mercy of an uncaring daughter-in-law. While there are good general arguments to explain why widows are often observed to be in a situation of vulnerability and neglect, it is also important to understand how, in some circumstances, they manage to escape that predicament. These are important directions in which to expand the study of intra-household inequalities in rural India.

MOTHERS AND SONS

As we saw earlier in this section, a large majority of Indian widows live with one or several of their adult sons, and this living arrangement is the main form of community support they receive. The relationship between a widowed mother and her son(s) is therefore of particular importance. Some aspects of this relationship are already covered by the preceding discussion, but one particular feature deserves further attention.

In rural north India, the norm of co-residence of a widowed mother with at least one of her sons is still very strong. If a widow has only one son, he is not likely to risk the disapproval of the community by rejecting this basic filial duty, even if this

living arrangement is problematic in one way or another (e.g. because of tensions between the widow and her daughter-in-law). The same applies when a widow has several sons living together, though this is not a very common situation since the patrilineal joint family tends to disintegrate quite rapidly after the death of the patriarch. If a widow has several sons living separately, however, the norm of co-residence loses some of its strength, since there is the possibility of each son relying on the others to look after his widowed mother.²⁹

Some communities have evolved systematic ways of dealing with this potential 'free-riding' problem, for instance through the further norm that *the youngest* son should take care of his elderly parents or widowed mother (with, possibly, a standard compensation for this extra burden being provided to this son in the form of ownership of a small piece of land earmarked to the subsistence needs of the

TABLE II: DISTRIBUTION OF CURRENT WIDOWS AND REMARRIED WIDOWS BY CASTE GROUP

Caste Group	Number of Widows		Percentage of Remarried Widows to Ever-Widowed
	Current	Re-married	
Upper castes	95	6*	5.9
Other castes			
Higher	31	1	3.1
Lower	66	15	18.5
Scheduled castes	68	14	17.1
Other groups	2	0	0.0
Total	262	36	12.1

* Mainly widows from a caste of ambiguous status, the Kayastha caste, in Bihar and West Bengal; and from a Rajput caste in UP Hills in which leviratic unions are common. Source: Chen [1991].

TABLE 10: REPORTED FORMS AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Forms of Support	Brothers	Daughters	In-Laws	Parents	Others ^a	Total
To children:						
Food	8	2	8	7	5	30
Clothes	8	1	8	7	4	28
School fees	4	1	3	2	2	12
Medicine	6	0	5	6	1	18
Marriage	2	0	2	1	0	5
Child care	1	0	7	2	3	13
To widow:						
Food	23	23	13	14	38	111
Clothes	24	27	12	14	34	111
Medicine	19	19	9	13	28	88
Care during illness	18	27	9	12	76	142
Gifts	61	64	8	16	45	194
Loans	5	2	4	1	131	143
Total	179	166	87	95	367	895

^a Not including sons.

Source: Chen [1991]. Each entry in this table indicates the number of widows who have reported support of the relevant type. This table incorporates the responses of a total of 262 widows, each widow may have reported more than one form or source of support. The 'Total' row and column should be interpreted accordingly.

Selected Contrasts: Influence of Caste

parents, or of ownership of the parental house). Otherwise, the sons may agree on a particular way to share the extra economic burden of supporting their widowed mother, e.g., by taking turns at maintaining her for a limited period of time. But these arrangements are not entirely reliable and can break down in a number of ways; for instance, a youngest son may migrate and leave his widowed mother to be looked after by his reluctant brothers, and brothers with very unequal earning abilities may quarrel about what a fair arrangement for supporting their mother would be. The arrangements in question seem to be particularly fragile in times of hardship such as succession of drought years, when the temptation to rely on one's brothers to take care of a widowed mother can be particularly strong.³⁰ In the study villages, that are several cases of a widow living on her own (often with little support from others) despite having adult sons.

Having said this, it is important to note that, in some circumstances, the existence of a plurality of sources of support can be turned to the *advantage* of a widowed mother. More precisely, if a widowed mother is in possession of some valuable asset (e.g., a piece of land), her sons may look at co-residence with her as a privilege rather than a burden. As a result, she is very likely to be securely integrated in the household of one of her adult sons. The credible threat of leaving that household to join one of her other sons may even strengthen her bargaining power within that household and ensure her good treatment.³¹ A similar situation would apply when a widow earns a pension that enables her to make some contribution to the household's income over and above the cost of her own subsistence. Here again, what can make a crucial difference is the ability of a widow to gain recognition as a person who contributes to the household economy, rather than being seen as an unwelcome liability.

So far, we have concentrated on identifying common patterns in the predicament of widows in north India. A more *refined* analysis would also have to investigate the diversities associated with factors such as caste, *class*, age or area of residence. A detailed investigation of this kind is clearly beyond the scope of this paper, but the contrasts involved may be briefly illustrated with reference to the particular issue of caste.

SANSKRITISATION PROCESS

There are major differences in gender relations among different castes in north India. These differences are particularly pronounced between the two poles of the caste hierarchy: at one end, the highly 'Sanskritised' upper castes; and, at the other, the so-called 'untouchables' and scheduled castes.

Social restrictions on the lifestyles of women tend to become more rigid as one moves up in the caste hierarchy. For instance, there is more seclusion of females among upper castes than among lower castes. Within upper-caste communities in north India, women are often strictly secluded and denied access to gainful employment outside their homes. By contrast, lower-caste women have greater freedom to take up gainful employment. Among the many castes which constitute the vast 'middle' of the caste hierarchy, what is considered appropriate behaviour or work for women is closely linked with the family's position (both ascribed and aspired) in the social-status hierarchy [Bardhan, 1985]. As a means to acquiring status' those who can afford to do so follow upper-caste norms in regard to women's lifestyles.

When particular caste groups acquire wealth, or aspire to higher status for some other reason, they often try to distance

themselves from households perceived to be lower in social status by emulating the practices of higher-status households. Different terms have been used to describe this imitation of upper castes by lower castes. The most common term is 'Sanskritisation', arising from the fact that certain Vedic or Sanskritic rites are confined to the upper castes. Other common terms, based on the identity of the group being imitated, are 'Brahminisation' and 'Rajputisation'.³² The point here is not to argue for one term or another, but to note the "strength of the tendency to imitate and also the main direction of the tendency" [Dumont, 1980: 192].

This process of imitation has very specific implications for women in general and for widows in particular. Indeed, one of the prominent forms it takes is the adoption of upper-caste norms regarding marriage and the behaviour of women. These include (1) the prohibition or disapproval of widow remarriage, and (2) the withdrawal of women from the labour market.

SANSKRITISATION AND LIFESTYLE OF WIDOWS

Among some middle-caste groups which used to allow widow remarriage, there is an emerging trend towards prohibiting or discouraging this 'disreputable' practice, as a means to achieving higher social status. An influence in the reverse direction arises from 'Westernisation', social reform movements and the erosion of traditional values. Under this influence, some castes have liberalised their attitude towards widow remarriage [Madan, 1989]. In the study villages, however, the trend towards more widespread prohibition against widow remarriage is noticeably stronger than the trend towards increased tolerance.

As far as labour force participation is concerned, a large number of widows—especially those who head households—are caught between the contradictory demands of Sanskritisation and survival. On the one hand, caste norms confine them to their homesteads; on the other, they need to work in order to provide for their families. This dilemma applies particularly to poor widows belonging to an upper caste or a status-aspiring group. It is especially acute for widows with insufficient male support to meet subsistence needs, and during the period of hardship that often follows the sudden loss of a husband. The plight of widows in this predicament is not enviable: if they enter the labour force, they risk scorn, censure, and (sometimes) excommunication from their kin or caste group; if they do not seek gainful employment, their families may have to endure extreme deprivation.

In the study villages, there are marked differences in the restrictions that apply to widow remarriage and women's work among upper and lower castes. Almost uniformly, upper castes prohibit widow remarriage and do not allow women to seek gainful employment outside the household. By contrast, scheduled castes permit widows to remarry and women to seek gainful employment

TABLE 12: ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF WIDOWS IN DIFFERENT CASTE GROUPS

Economic Activity	Upper Castes		Other Castes				Scheduled Castes	
	No	Per Cent	Higher	Lower	No	Per Cent	No	Per Cent
Wage labour								
Farm	2	2	0	0	13	20	34	50
Non-farm	3	3	0	0	3	5	16	24
Migrant	1	1	0	0	1	2	4	6
Cultivation	49	52	4	13	35	53	21	31
Animal husbandry	22	23	0	0	1	2	0	0
Caste services	0	0	0	0	4	6	6	9
Self-employment								
In village	4	4	1	3	5	8	6	9
Outside village	0	0	1	3	0	0	4	6
Trade								
In village	0	0	0	0	3	5	1	1
Outside village	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1

Note: Each entry in the table shows the number (or percentage) of widows from the relevant caste group who reported the indicated activity. Some widows reported more than one activity, and some reported none. The numbers of widows in each group are as follows: upper castes (95); other, higher (31); other, lower (66); scheduled castes (68).

Source: Chen [1991]

wherever it is available. The large number of 'other' castes which form the middle part of the hierarchy can be divided into those which aspire to higher status and imitate upper-caste norms (particularly in regard to widow remarriage and women's work) and those which still follow lower-caste norms.³³

Tables 11 and 12 bring out some of these contrasts. Out of a total of 275 ever-widowed women in the eight study villages, only 36 had remarried, of which 29 were from scheduled or lower' castes. Only six out of upper-caste widows reported being engaged in wage labour, whereas a large percentage of 'lower'-caste widows, and an even larger percentage of scheduled-caste widows, reported wage labour as an economic activity. Further, whereas five scheduled-caste widows reported being engaged in self-employment or trade outside their village of residence, only one other widow (from a 'higher' caste) reported this activity.

One general lesson emerging from all this is that it is important to treat widows as individuals, rather than simply as members of particular social groups (eg, a caste or a class). While upper castes generally have a privileged social and economic status, for instance, the same does not necessarily apply to the upper-caste widow. In fact, an upper-caste widow who has no adult sons to support her and who is nonetheless prevented by caste norms from seeking gainful employment may be just as deprived as a scheduled-caste widow who does not experience these restrictions. Patterns linking the living conditions of a widow to her caste status do exist, but these patterns can be quite different from those that might apply to other members of the society.

VI

Concluding Remarks

The north Indian widow tends to be a highly marginalised person. She typically receives very little support from persons other than her own children, and even when she lives with one or several of her adult sons she remains highly vulnerable to neglect (Section IV). Further, her ability to engage in income-earning activities of her own is severely restricted, partly due to various patriarchal norms such as patrilineal inheritance and the division of labour by gender (Section III). The consequences of this social and economic marginalisation are manifest, as far as one can tell from the limited evidence available, in poor health and high mortality levels (Section II),

The marginalisation of widows in north India is consistent with the traditional perception of Hindu widows as inauspicious and guilty women who, ideally, should lead a life of austerity devoted to the memory of their husband. This ideological influence, however, may be less crucial than the simple fact that widows are often seen as an economic burden. The most effective way of ensuring the social protection of Indian widows is perhaps to help them to be recognised as persons who have something important to contribute to the household economy.

If we bring up this general observation in this concluding section, it is because, in the field of social security, Incentives' are often seen—quite rightly—as a major issue. When it comes to the social protection of widows, the most important incentive effect to consider would be the possibility that state-based social security measures might 'displace' whatever support widows receive from the community. This problem should not be lightly dismissed, and it is easy to think of particular measures that are likely to have precisely that effect.³⁴ However, it is also important to recognise and make use of the potential complementarities that exist between state support and community support. A major source of such complementarity, discussed on several occasions in Section IV, is the fact that a widow who has some economic resourcefulness of her own may well be less exposed to residential isolation and intra-household discrimination.

We have not explored, in this paper, the particular strategies that could be devised to support the livelihood of widows in rural India. The provision of pensions, the protection of land rights and the promotion of gainful employment are obvious possibilities, but the diversity of constraints that restrict the lifestyle of widows in rural north India also suggests that many other avenues of action can be pursued. A detailed discussion of the feasibility and desirability of alternative measures would require a study of its own, which we do hope to undertake on another occasion.³⁵ At this stage, our concern is mainly to contribute to a better awareness and understanding of this severely neglected problem. This is a prerequisite of effective action in this field.

Indeed, the government is unlikely to give adequate priority to the social protection of widows in rural India in the absence of public pressure. Further, an effective implementation of social security measures may require a great deal of activism on the part of nongovernment institutions, in-

cluding the women's movement. In fact, there is already a substantial scope for improving the living conditions of widows even within the existing parameters of state involvement.

This point may be illustrated with reference to the issue of pensions. In most states of India, pension schemes of some kind do exist on paper, but, with the notable exception of Kerala, they have a negligible coverage and impact. The reasons include bureaucratic indifference, inadequate financial provisions, widespread corruption and limited public awareness of the opportunities involved. In the study villages, only 20 widows out of 262 reported receiving a pension, while another 58 unsuccessfully applied (see Table 13 for details). Of the 20 widows who do receive a pension, 13 are upper-caste friends of the village headman or of some other influential village elder. Much can be done to bring about a more ambitious, efficient and equitable implementation of these pension schemes.¹⁶

Similar observations apply with reference to land rights. According to the Hindu Succession Act of 1956, which is still applicable today, all the 'legal heirs' of a deceased person are entitled to equal shares of his or her property. The legal heirs, in the case of a married man, consist of his widow, his sons, daughters, and widowed mother (if he has one). Helping widows to assert and defend their basic property rights is another field where much can be achieved through public activism within the existing legal and policy framework, without waiting for the initiative and goodwill of the state.

We should like to conclude with an incidental thought on methodology. Much of this paper has focused on various aspects of the economic condition of widows, and it may seem that the issue of health as such has been somewhat neglected. It is the use of mortality indicators, however, that enables us to recognise an enormous social problem which is largely hidden in the standard, household-level economic variables. Insofar as one of the directions in which development policy has to be improved is a better focus on the individual, the combination of economic and demographic analysis deserves to become a major analytical tool.

Notes

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TABLE 13: NUMBER OF WIDOWS WHO NEVER APPLIED, APPLIED BUT DID NOT RECEIVE, AND RECEIVED PENSIONS (BY CASTE)

	Upper Castes		Other Castes				Scheduled Castes		Others		Total	
	No	Per Cent	Upper No	Upper Per Cent	Lower No	Lower Per Cent	No	Per Cent	No	Per Cent	No	Per Cent
Never applied	62	65	26	84	38	58	57	84	1	50	184	70
Did not receive	20	21	5	16	24	36	9	13	0	0	58	22
Received	13	14	0	0	4	6	2	3	1	50	20	8
Total	95	100	31	100	66	100	68	100	2	100	262	100

Source: Chen [1991]

Helsinki, for financial support, and to the National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi, and the Indian Statistical Institute, New Delhi, for logistic assistance.].

1 There is, admittedly, a large literature on 'female-headed households' in rural India, and it is also the case that a majority of female household heads are widows. However, these studies provide a very limited basis for studying the economic and social condition of widows as individuals. See Dreze [1990] for further discussion of this point, and of the insights that can be gained into the life of Indian widows from the existing literature on female-headed households, aging, kinship, sati and related subjects.

2 For a more detailed discussion of the living conditions of widows in rural India, and of implications for action, see Dreze [1990] and Chen [1991], on which the present paper amply draws.

3 Unless stated otherwise, the term 'widowhood' will be used in this paper to refer to female widowhood specifically.

4 The Bangladesh village is in Mymensingh district, northern Bangladesh. Two of the Indian villages are in Maharashtra state (in Sholapur and Akola districts). The third Indian village is in Mahbubnagar district of Andhra Pradesh.

5 This is aside from the limitations that apply to these standard economic variables even in the absence of intra-household inequalities. (See Dreze [1990] for further discussion.)

6 The state of Assam, where the 1981 Census did not take place, is excluded from the discussion of this section. So are the other five states of the north east (Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura), which have small populations and rather special demographic social and cultural features.

7 In this paper 'south India' refers to the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and 'north India' refers to the rest of the country.

8 See Verma [1988: 97-98]. For men, life expectancy is 'only' fifteen years shorter in Uttar Pradesh than in Kerala.

9 See Dreze [1990]. The suggestion that the incidence of widow remarriage is lower in south India than in north India may strike as counter-intuitive, insofar as it conflicts with the widely-accepted notion that the former region is comparatively advanced when it comes to the position of women in society. However, a large proportion of widow 'remarriages' in India are accounted for by ascribed leviratic unions, a practice more widespread in the north, and especially in the north-west, than in the south. Higher rates of widow remarriage in the north may thus confirm rather than contradict that region's reputation for 'backwardness' in gender relations

10 Patrilocal residence and patrilineal inheritance can themselves be seen as two crucial aspects of the north Indian system of 'patrilineal kinship'. A deeper analysis of the status of women in general and of widows in particular would have to include a serious discussion of this kinship system, as well as of the patriarchal authority struc-

tures that go with it.

11 This definition assumes village exogamy, which is itself a nearly universal feature of marriage practices in north India. We overlook here the subtler distinction between 'patrilocal' and 'virilocal', which turns on whether or not the husband continues to live with his father after marrying.

12 An example of exceptions to this general rule is the case of widow who used to live in her parental village at the time of losing her husband, possibly because the latter was a 'gharjamai' (uxorilocal son-in-law). A 'gharjamai' is a married man who is invited by his parents-in-law to come and live with them, usually because they have no son themselves.

13 As wives, women have no coparcenary rights in their conjugal families; they only have a right of maintenance.

14 In such cases, the 'gharjamai' (in-marrying husband) assumes the duties of a natural son [Cain, 1986].

15 For a detailed discussion of widow remarriage in north India, and an evaluation of earlier studies on this subject, see Dreze [1990]

16 The remarriage of a childless widow tends to be an attractive proposition for most of the interested parties. For the widow herself, it is the only path to motherhood. From the point of view of the in-laws, accepting or encouraging the remarriage and departure of a childless widow is a convenient way of regaining control over her deceased husband's land. As far as the father and brothers of the widow are concerned, it is plausible that compassion often motivates them to arrange her remarriage. In addition, among communities where brothers (or fathers) have a strong obligation to support a widowed sister (or daughter), a childless widow may be seen as a threat of lifelong liability, especially if she is anxious to leave her husband's village

17 In north India, the 'remarriage' of a widow is not considered as a 'second marriage', but rather as a marriage of an inferior kind (or what Louis Dumont calls a 'secondary marriage'). It is referred to by terms (e.g. 'nataru' in Gujarat, 'sagai' in Uttar Pradesh, 'sangha' in West Bengal) which are unrelated to the words that would be used for a first marriage ('lagan', 'shadi', 'biye')

18 It should be added that a widowed mother cannot always assume that she will be able to take her sons with her (or even to see them occasionally) if she leaves her first husband's village to remarry. Her in-laws may object, given the notion that her sons belong to their own lineage.

19 See Dreze [1990] and Chen [1991] for further discussion.

20 See Dreze (1990) for recent empirical evidence as well as a review of earlier studies, including those of Bose and Saxena [1964], Bose and Sen [1966], Mani siddaiah [1969], Lal [1972], Shah [1973], Cain et al [1979], Vatuk [1981], Cain [1986], Krishnakumari [1987] and Vlassoff [1990].

21 Table 10 does not include information on inter-household transfers from sons. As was discussed earlier, widows who have sons usually live with them (or at least with one of them), so that support from sons mainly takes the form of intra-household rather

than inter-household transfers. The relationship between widowed mothers and their sons is discussed in section 4.4.

22 See, e.g., Harlan [1968], Sharma [1980: 53-55], Bhawe [1983], Lopamudra [1983], Saraswati [1985], Dak and Sharma [1987], Krishnakumari [1987], Gulati and Rajan [1988: 74], Lingam Lakshmi [1988: 89], Ghoshal [1989], Kumari [1989], Dreze [1990].

23 Kven as eminent an anthropologist as Stanley Tambiah assumes that "precisely because the Indian woman is incorporated into her husband's household and joint family, she enjoys greater economic security than her African counterpart when she becomes a widow" [Tambiah, 1989: 416]

24 Widows, and women more generally, commonly assert that they relinquished their share of their father's land in return for the promise of maintenance and/or support should they be widowed, divorced, or deserted. Sisters tie a protective cord around the wrist of their brother during the 'rakhi' festival to help ensure that their brothers will, when needed, protect and support them.

25 See Dreze [1990]. This finding is based on National Sample Survey data for Karnataka (1977-78); the difference in per capita expenditure levels between households with and without widow may be somewhat larger in north India than in this south Indian state

26 A complementary explanation could be that the incidence of poverty among households with a widow is much greater than among households without a widow, despite similar average per capita expenditure levels, due to high levels of economic inequality within the former group. The incidence of poverty may well be quite high in this group, bearing in mind that it includes a significant proportion of vulnerable households (e.g. widows with small children). However, it would be implausible to attribute all or even most of the observed contrast between expenditure and mortality data to this factor: such an attribution would imply amazingly high levels of mortality among the poorer widow-inclusive households.

27 On these different approaches, see Dreze and Sen [1989: chapter 4], and the literature cited there. Note that return and desert can be important whether household decisions are seen to be taken by one maximising individual (the household 'head'), or whether they are seen as the outcome of a co-operative conflict (in which case return and desert can be regarded as one determinant of bargaining power).

28 Quite a few empirical studies mention that ownership of land or other assets considerably enhance the status, treatment or bargaining power of the aged (including widows) within the household. See e.g. Harlan [1968: 474], Marulasiddaiah [1969: 117], Raj and Prasad [1971:156-58], Cain et al [1979: 7], Bhawe [1983: 6], Dak and Sharma (1987:49, 54), Wadley [n.d.]. As one old man bluntly put it, "without property, children do not look after their parents well" Kited in Caldwell et al [1988: 191].

29 This is the situation alluded to in the popular Bengali saying 'bhaager ma Ganga paac na' which can be literally translated

as a shared mother will not reach the Ganges', and is used in diverse contexts to refer to the problem of 'free-riding'.

- 30 See Dreze [1990] for further discussion, and some empirical evidence from drought-affected villages in Gujarat.
- 31 This situation is not just a theoretical possibility. See Dreze [1990] and Chen [1991] for some empirical illustrations from the study villages;
- 32 The notion of Sanskritisation is perhaps best presented in the words of M N Srinivas, who popularised the concept: "The caste system is far from a rigid system in which the position of each component caste is fixed for all time. Movement has always been possible, and especially so in the middle regions of the hierarchy. A low caste was able to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by 'Sanskritising' its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over as far as possible; the customs, rites and beliefs of the brahmins, and the adoption of the brahminical way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden. This process has been called 'Sanskritisation' in this book" [Srinivas 1952: 30].
- 33 In Tables 11 and 12, these two groups of 'other' castes are referred to as 'higher' and 'lower', respectively.
- 34 For instance, a pension scheme that disqualifies widows who live with their adult sons could have the effect of discouraging the integration of a widowed mother in the household of one of her adult sons.
- 35 For preliminary discussions of the scope for social security measures based on the provision of pensions, the protection of land rights and the promotion of gainful employment, see Dreze [1990] and Chen [1991].
- 36 For an actual example of how collective action (led, in this instance, by widows themselves) can succeed in bringing about a radical change in the implementation of pension schemes, see Dreze [1990]. See also Gulati [1990] and Nair and Tracy [1989] on Kerala's Agricultural Workers' Pension Scheme

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