

A happy homecoming for India's widows

1 A group of Indian widows have returned to their home city of Calcutta to raise awareness about the plight of thousands of women who are thrown out by their families after their husbands die. The BBC's Rahul Tandon in Calcutta meets them to hear their stories.



The group of 58 widows visited Calcutta to celebrate the festival of Durga Puja

5 Annapurna Sharma is walking around the streets of Calcutta with a group of women. They are all laughing and joking, some of them are holding hands. It is a sight that you will see in every Indian city. But this is an unusual group - they are widows who are normally shunned by society, women who are expected to live in the shadows. They are all dressed in the traditional plain white sari except for Annapurna, who is in blue. She is wearing a fashionable beaded necklace and shimmering pearl earrings whereas her friends have no jewellery at all. Annapurna, in her late 30s, says she wants to be "the face of the modern Indian widow".

20 Her story is a common one. When her husband died, she was thrown out by her in-laws. They believed she had brought bad luck to their family and that she was responsible for their son's death. She returned to her parents' home but when they died, with no-one to turn to she went to live in an ashram (a religious centre) in Varanasi.

'Don't want to hide'

25 But unlike many Indian widows, she decided not to disappear. She vowed that her husband's death would not define the rest of her life and is now studying to become a teacher. "In the old days people expected widows to behave in a certain way, but why should I do that?" she says. "I do not want to wear white and hide away. Just because I am a woman doesn't mean that my life should end when my husband died," she adds. It is a sentiment many of the widows here share. Annapurna is part of a group of 58 women from the northern Indian towns of Vrindavan and Varanasi who were in Calcutta recently to celebrate the festival of Durga Puja.

35 For many, returning home is a journey they thought they would never make, since when a widow leaves this city, she rarely returns. So this journey is not just an emotional one, it is also one that defies convention. And they are all determined to make the most of this trip. Even though many of them are in their 60s, they are full of energy and it is hard to keep up with them. "I want to walk every inch of these streets, eat all the sweets this city has to offer and take a tram ride," says one.