A strident controversy hit the Bengali media recently, with the release of the first cinematic version of Rabindranath Tagore’s famous novel *Chokher Bali* in October 2003. The novel, written in 1903, portraying a wilful, sensuous, upper caste widow—Binodini, was subject to major controversy when it was published. A century after the writing of the novel, the film, directed by Rituparno Ghosh, has rekindled the controversy. Binodini, the sexual widow, returned and recaptured the imagination of the Bengali public.

*Chokher Bali* marked a sharp break with Bankim Chandra’s *Bishabriksha* and *Krishnakanter Will*, both depicting widows in sexual relationships. The widow, Binodini, was placed within the context of a newly emerging urban middle class family of twentieth century Bengal. Capable of both passion and intrigue, she disrupted the harmonious conjugal and filial relationships within the family. Unlike the lecherous Shyamasundari, the widowed sister-in-law of Kumudini, in *Jogajog*\(^1\) or the fastidious and jealous Mejorani, the widowed sister-in-law of Bimala, in *Ghare Baire*\(^2\) (The Home and the World), Binodini was self-aware even as she was disruptive, strong and dignified both in surrender and rejection. With Binodini, it has often been argued, Tagore inaugurated a new era of female characterization in Bengali literature. However, film director Rituparno Ghosh was not entirely happy with Tagore’s characterization of Binodini, ‘Tagore seemed to have imposed widowhood on Binodini as a literary device either to enhance the commercial value of the novel or to heighten her sexual attraction for readers’. Ghosh explained,

> [Tagore] did not directly encounter harsh realities of widowhood. The widow’s struggle was not only against her sexual desires. The daily routine of rituals and deprivations could reduce an ordinary woman into becoming helpless, mean and selfish…. Realistically perhaps, it might have been natural for a destitute widow, coming from abject poverty to seek, first of all, sexual pleasures in Mahendra’s arms. But then,

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Chokher Bali’s author would have been someone else, not Rabindranath.3

Consequently, the film was criticised for taking extreme liberties with the Tagore original. In ‘deconstructing’ the classic, Ghosh’s film was accused of producing a ‘passion play’, focusing on the sexual forays of the young Hindu widow.4 Ghosh’s attempt to recreate a psychological novel within a fixed historical time frame, according to critics, failed on ‘both artistic and ethical scores’. In the film, ‘one misses the dignity and self respect which went into the making of Binodini in the novel. Instead Ghosh has made Binodini virtually a nymphomaniac’.5 Binodini, in the film, is engaged in wild trysts with Mahendra, and desperately yearns for sexual gratification of her love for Behari. The young widow displays herself shamelessly in a red jacket and in gold jewellery. The one scene that excited much controversy and some disgust was the depiction of an unexpected onset of menstruation while Binodini was engaged in the kitchen during ambubachi. Was this a pollution of the ritual purity of abstemious widowhood? Or, was it a depiction of the other elderly widows’ discomfort with sexuality? The young widow was not, as she was supposed to be, ‘sexually dead’.

Chokher Bali was not the first public controversy over widowhood in India at the turn of the twenty-first century. Deepa Mehta’s attempt to film Water, tracing the lives of widows in Benares and their ‘transgressive’ sexual experiences, fell foul of neo-Hindutva ideologues. Agitators went on a rampage and forced Mehta to stop the shooting. Mehta was accused of defaming Benares, the city of virtue, by portraying its widows as prostitutes. Recent researches have proven that from the late nineteenth century, Benares sheltered many young widows and some of them found a niche in the brothels around the city. But ideologues have no truck with facts, and Mehta was criticized for misrepresenting virtuous widowhood, and desecrating the holy city with her tales of promiscuous priests and widows.6 Once again, in the late twentieth century, as in the late nineteenth century, Hindu cultural nationalists found it necessary to assert and affirm the

ideal of ascetic and pure widowhood. The honour of the widow, even in celluloid, seems very fragile indeed.

In the Mumbai film industry, *Prem Rog* (1982), one of Raj Kapoor's less publicized films, delved into the issue of enforced widowhood, tonsure and sexual abuse of widows. Manorama, in *Prem Rog*, was a young, high caste woman who became a widow after a few months of her marriage. Raped by her brother-in-law, she came back to her parental home, where she was forced to observe rigorous asceticism, adhering to rigid dress and dietary restrictions. Raj Kapoor finally allowed his widowed heroine to remarry, running counter to mainstream cine sentiment. Manorama remained a rare exception. Running to empty houses, the film was rejected by the Indian audience. With a few exceptions, the tinsel media and now the small screen, have, by and large, upheld the image of the pure and ascetic widow. The most acceptable role for a widow, in popular cinema, is that of a mother, always nurturing, protecting, and empowering her son/s.

Contemporary concerns of the media with the depiction of Hindu widowhood is a legacy of nationalist anxieties about the role and status of women. These anxieties were the product of India's encounter with colonialism in the nineteenth century. This thesis has discussed how Hindu widows became the first theatre of social experiments, seeking to accommodate new ideas within the existing social framework. The first major 'social reform' controversy was over widows—whether or not they could be immolated on the funeral pyre of their husbands. The next debate was over whether or not the widows, whose lives were guaranteed by the colonial state, could marry again. In both these cases, elite reformers from the higher castes invited the colonial state to legislatively intervene in what they perceived to be a gross injustice within the Indian social order.

By the late nineteenth century, attention once again turned to widows. An emerging group of proto-nationalists felt the need to focus on widows as the ground from which to mount resistance against colonial intervention. They rediscovered the spiritual and 'national' significance of the widow's celibacy. Even the act of *Sati* was reinscribed as the supreme act of resistance and self-sacrifice. On the body of the sacrificial and spiritually empowering woman/widow, emerged the Hindu/Indian nation. With the emergence of cultural nationalism, the reformist critique of traditional practices was
rejected as 'un-national'. The figure of the Hindu woman became both the spiritual essence and the physical embodiment of the nation and all questions about women's actual social and economic conditions were dismissed as irrelevant and even illegitimate.

Why was widowhood of such overwhelming importance in Bengali society? Indeed, it seems to have remained an issue of enduring importance, two centuries after the 'problem' was discovered. The answer is simple. Enforcement of widowhood (that is, social, if not legal, prohibition of remarriage), coupled with a long-held tradition of early marriage and hypergamy, produced large numbers of widows in Bengali society. They lived in every home as mothers, grandmothers, aunts or daughters-in-law. Even a cursory glance at the Census shows that almost a quarter of the total female population in Bengal was composed of widows at the turn of the twentieth century. This numerical preponderance must have contributed towards a significant social presence, compounded by the strongly marked visible signs of widowhood in the unadorned white apparel and the shorn hair. A large number of women, as widows, continued to derive their identities as 'wives of dead men', but were excluded from active conjugality, legitimate sexual and reproductive roles. Widows remained difficult to reconcile within the social arrangements of the *brahminic* patriarchy. And yet, widowhood was an experience in every woman's life—in reality or in the dread of expectation.

The Census figures pointed out that the concentration of widows was the highest in Bengal. In 1881, widows constituted 21.3 per cent of the total female population, and among Hindus, the proportion was recorded at 22.7 per cent. Bengal continued to maintain this distinction up to the early twentieth century. This, of course, is not to suggest that the proportion of widows had not declined. In Bengal, the percentage of widows, of all religions, declined from 21.3 per cent in 1881 to 17.6 percent in 1931. In the urban centres of Bengal, especially in Calcutta, where the concentration of widows was greater than the rest of Bengal, the numbers declined at a steadier rate. The decline in proportion of widows was sharper in the age group between 15-40, which being the age of child bearing also marked the highest rate of female mortality. In Calcutta, the

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7 Gait, *Census of India*, 1901, 266.
percentage of Hindu widows came down from 32.2 percent in 1901 to 28.6 percent in 1911, and to 24.9 per cent in 1921.\(^8\)

While the percentage of widows followed a downward turn, the number of widowers was in fact increasing. The increase was more striking among Hindu males in the decade of the 1880s and the 1900s. Did the spread of new social ideas also restrain widowers from marrying again after the death of their wives? According to L.S.S. O’Malley, the downward drift in the number of Hindu widows from 1881 to 1911 was due to the gradual increase in the age of marriage and partly perhaps, though to a small degree, to the greater prevalence of widow remarriage. A wider diffusion of education and incidentally, ‘greater familiarity with the high ethical standards’ among the educated elite in Bengal led to a movement in favour of marriage of young widows. A few of such marriages, argued O’ Malley, had already taken place among Hindu families of high social status.\(^9\)

In 1901, E.A. Gait set forth three possible explanations for the decline in the number of widows. First, incidence of widow remarriage might have been coming more into vogue, second, the castes who permitted the practice of remarriage might have been increasing more rapidly than those who forbade it, and third, the decline might have been due to the postponement of marriage and a greater parity in the ages between husband and wife. Together these factors resulted in a social change, where fewer women outlived their husbands than before. However, as Gait himself clarified, there was no reason for supposing that the castes who had forbidden their widows to marry again or who discouraged the practice were losing their old prejudices. If anything, he said, ‘the tendency is in the other direction’. The second explanation appealed to him to a certain extent. The Vaishanavas, for example, allowed the practice of widow remarriage, and this in turn, tended to expand their community by the accretion of outsiders who wished to escape the restrictions on marriage with widows. But such changes were not sufficiently numerous to affect the general result indicated by the comparison. The third explanation, however, must also be given some importance. At the beginning of the twentieth century,

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\(^8\) Thompson, *Census of India*, 1921, 64.

\(^9\) O’Malley, *Census of India*, 1911.
especially in east and central Bengal, the practice of child marriage was steadily falling into disrepute.\textsuperscript{10}

In response to the same query, in 1931, Census official A. E. Porter forwarded another set of explanations. The decline in the practice of kulinism, decrease in child marriage of females, and the narrowing age-gap between bride and groom, Porter suggested, together led to a decline in the number of widows. There was also a rising trend in widow remarriages in major cities, like Calcutta, Howrah and Dacca, especially among the middle classes.\textsuperscript{11} It is, however, difficult to evaluate these various factors and reach a conclusion about their relative importance in the decline of widows in Bengal.

In the last few decades of the twentieth century, the incidence of widowhood has been declining slowly. The unique vulnerability of the widow, following from the importance given to marriage and male guardianship, nonetheless, remains a difficulty. The rigidity of abstinence and physical deprivation may have been reduced, especially among the urban \textit{bhadralok}. In India, widows represented a little over 8 per cent of the total female population in 1991. But the gap between the proportion of widows and widowers is still significant in India. In 1991, only 2.5 percent men were recorded as widowers. As expected, however, incidence of widowhood rose sharply with age. The proportion was almost 64 percent among women aged sixty, and it rose to almost 80 percent at the age of seventy.\textsuperscript{12} In her study on widows in India, Martha Alter Chen maintains that an Indian woman who survives to old age is almost certain to become a widow.\textsuperscript{13} India records the highest concentration of widows of all age groups.\textsuperscript{14}

In India, even today marriage is a near universal phenomenon, while instances of widow remarriages are few and far between. Child widows, even so-called virgin widows, are not uncommon in India. The rules of remarriage in urban India vary enormously according to caste and cultural preferences.\textsuperscript{15} With increasing emphasis

\textsuperscript{10} Gait, \textit{Census of India}, 1901, 259-260.
\textsuperscript{11} Porter, \textit{Census of India}, 1931.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} A 45 year old widow, Asha Devi, belonging to the low caste, Tharu community was tonsured and paraded by her community members for remarrying a sixty year old widower Bhikari Mahato in Bihar. The marriage was considered ‘sinful’ as the couple belonged to the same village and for having ‘crossed’ their marriageable ages. \textit{The Statesman}, 17 November 2002.
placed on rituals and ceremonies in the popular media, Hindu marriage is still upheld as a sacrament with *saptapadi*, *kusandika* and *gotrantar*, even in civil law. While under the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, a Hindu man can still practice bigamy unless the first wife goes to court; it is difficult for a woman to seek divorce and to furnish the proof of her husband’s adultery. Moreover, the onus of conjugal harmony in a Hindu marriage rests on the woman.

While signal material changes have taken place in the lives of urban, middle class widows of India, the cultural world-view of Hindu society still adheres to the image of the pure and immaculate widow upholding the moral order. In Bengal, the majority of married women continue to observe the symbolic markers of wifehood like the *sindur* (vermilion), *sankha* (conch shell bangle) and *loha* or *noa* (iron bangle). These marks of ‘auspicious’ wifehood are taken away from a woman on the death of her husband, thereby underlining the state of widowhood. Regulations of widows’ austerity and mortification have, however, been slackened to a considerable extent. Few widows now undertake tonsure or other marks of ascetic widowhood, but even today, a section of the urban widows stick to a vegetarian diet, observe ritual fasts and mostly dress in white *sarees*, even though the unrelieved white apparel may have fallen into relative disuse.

Despite the guarantee of widows’ property rights in the Hindu Succession Act of 1956, social norms and cultural practices severely restrict the widow’s rights to property and maintenance. On paper, the Hindu Succession Act codified the multiple legal provisions making women, as well as widows, absolute owners of the property inherited. The widow, now a direct and absolute heir, is empowered with all legal claims of ownership, to possess and to dispose. The Act transformed the widow’s ‘limited life estate’ into a ‘full estate’ or absolute ownership. As the widow can no longer be deprived of property by law, physical intimidation and brutal measures are adopted to deny the widow her share and sometimes the male in-laws end up arranging her murder. Despite the first degree of female heirs being given the right to demand a partition, in practice, ‘the retention of the concept of coparceners or the nucleus of a Hindu undivided family

gave a better deal to the son. However, under customary norms, a woman's right, as a widow to her husband's property, is stronger than her right as a daughter in her father's property, realization of which is contingent on the presence or absence of male kin. If she has brothers, widowed daughters, even if young and childless, are denied their share or maintenance in the parental home. In Haryana, as an aftermath of the Hindu Succession Act, argues Prem Chowdhry, the pressure on widows to enter into levirate unions with their brothers-in-law had considerably increased. Levirate increasingly appeared as the preferred form of widow remarriage, as it allowed the male kin of the husband to appropriate the widow's share in the property. Refusal to forfeit and to transfer her rights to her male in-laws often resulted in beatings and even murder.

In India, most witches, killed or burnt to death, are childless elderly widows. Chen points out that in some tribal communities in West Bengal, Bihar and Rajasthan, elderly widows who try to establish claims on the husband's land are labelled witches and are excommunicated and murdered. In their study, Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan have argued that the immediate economic objective of witch-hunting is the denial of the widow's life interests in land. The killing of widows as witches immediately transfers the property to her husband's male relations.

While in parts of western India, some communities still celebrate the burning of young widows as Sati, Bengal keeps alive the tradition of despatching widows to distant tirthas (pilgrimage spots) like Benares and Vrindavan. This abandonment, masked in religious belief of spiritual salvation, seeks to cover the routine deprivation of widows by their families. In 1997-1998, the state government of Uttar Pradesh, finding the unceasing influx and continuing presence of destitute Bengali widows onerous, complained about the sanitary and municipal problems caused by vast numbers of Bengali widows. The U.P. government proposed their repatriation and claimed that they should rightly be considered the responsibility of the West Bengal state government.

18 Chen, Perpetual Mourning, 266.
An official team, commissioned by the Social Welfare Ministry of the Government of West Bengal, was deputed to Vrindavan to estimate and survey the 'problem' of widows, living in the Vrajadhram area of Uttar Pradesh. The committee acknowledged the concentration of destitute Bengali widows, depending on chattars and bhajanashrams in Vrindavan. However, it was pointed out that Bengal is not the only state, which sends off widows to these pilgrimage centres. The influx is widespread, as widows from many states of India and even from the neighbouring Bangladesh and Nepal flock to Vrindavan and Benares. While such exodus has been taking place for a long period, the plight of widows in the holy cities has come to be highlighted only during the last decades of the twentieth century. After their complete enumeration, the Bengal deputation noted that there was a deliberate 'sensationalization' by the local and national media, which calculated the number of destitute widows at about 16,000. The committee found the number grossly exaggerated. While the local administration and the report of the National Commission for Women failed to accurately estimate the actual number of widows, the Bengal commission enumerated a total number of 2,910 Bengali widows, which was much less than the total claimed by the U.P. government. While newspaper reports argue that 85 per cent widows in Vrindavan are from Bengal, the survey of the West Bengal government claimed that only 53 per cent women, including widows and deserted women, are from Bengal.

While old widows congregated in search of shelter and food, Vrindavan also sheltered many young widows. The age-old system of sevadasi, part of institutional religion, exposes unprotected, young widows to sexual exploitation. The committee expressed concern over the possibility of trafficking agents, being active in the sacred cities. Recent findings verified that widows are sometimes enticed to join maths and ashrams and are sexually exploited by the priests. Many women turn to prostitution for their livelihood. The Bengal deputation recommended a rehabilitation scheme for young widows who are no less vulnerable and destitute than the older ones.

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22 Kushwaha, 'Songs sung blue'.
23 Report of Survey, ibid, 10.
24 Ibid, 16.
25 Chen, Perpetual Mourning, 149-150.
When interviewed by the official team, most widows, however, did not express any desire to return to their homes. Interviews with some widows revealed that they enjoyed a unique identity of their own. Mostly hailing from the Vaishnava sect, widows may have found religious solace in Vrindavan, the home of Radha.26 There is, perhaps, an emotional bonding and a sense of belonging to the large community of widows within the ashrams. Most widows have got used to the ashram life and preferred the freedom to their family. According to many widows, Vrindavan is a more secure place to live in, if shelter and pension are provided to them. Their experience of family was replete with memories of humiliation, hardship and isolation. Returning home meant a return to the daily humiliation from which they had fled, or the marginalization, which prompted the banishment from their families.

There is no denying that widows in Vrindavan eke out a deplorable existence in the bhajanashrams and other charitable shelters. Official observers as well as researchers have reported that to obtain a daily ration of a handful of rice and dal and a sum of two rupees, widows are required to sing bhajans for four to eight hours in praise of lord Krishna.27 While a few of them are employed as maids in the local households, many widows earn their livelihood by begging on the streets of Vrindavan. Most of them live their precarious existence in charitable wards and ashrams, huddling together in dimly lit, dingy rooms.

The Bengal deputation has argued that the U.P. government has no legal right to demand the repatriation of the Bengali widows since they are voluntary migrants, settled in the holy cities of India, and unwilling to return to their ‘native’ states. The committee further suggested that more attention should be paid in the pilgrimage centres by the central as well as the U.P. government to improve the condition of widows. Evidently, as earlier, no social institution or political agency deem themselves responsible for these ‘unwanted’ widows—neither the family, nor the concerned state or the society. The Uttar Pradesh and the West Bengal governments are busy passing the onus of responsibility on to each other.

26 Ibid.
27 Kushwaha, ‘Songs sung blue’.
There were two historical moments when the state intervened on behalf of widows. In 1856, it was a colonial government, which passed the Widow Remarriage Act enabling Hindu widows to get remarried. The Act did not translate into social action. Subsequently, the government refused to take any further responsibility, rejecting in 1886 Malabari's efforts at giving teeth to the legal abolition of Enforced Widowhood. It was a century after the Act that in 1956, the independent Indian government enacted the Hindu Succession Act, removing the forfeiture clause upon remarriage and allowing widows to inherit the deceased husband's property and enjoy full ownership. This Act, too, has not been overly successful. Widows are routinely deprived of their inheritance, even exiled and killed, if they pose any threat to patrilineal succession. Subsequent governments have contributed little towards the realization of the widows' rights or, indeed, towards their protection.

At the turn of the twenty first century, the widow once again becomes a figure of controversy, this time, as a sanitary and municipal 'problem'. A problem that the two state governments of Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal are currently engaged in passing off on each other. The widow remains a lonely figure in Bengal’s social and political landscape, a symbol of misfortune and marginalization, of denial and deprivation.