



BELOVED DAUGHTERS

FAZAL SHEIKH

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS SERIES

In 2001 Fazal Sheikh conceived of a series of projects that would engage an international audience and further their understanding of complex human rights issues around the world. These projects would take a variety of forms—books, films, catalogues, exhibitions—and would be disseminated as widely as possible. The first two projects, *A Camel for the Son* and *Ramadan Moon* (2001), concerned the situation of women refugees from Somalia living in long-term camps in northern Kenya and as asylum seekers in The Netherlands. The third project was a DVD based on Fazal Sheikh's book *The Victor Weeps* (Scalo 1998), a study of Afghan refugee communities exiled to camps on the North Pakistan border. In 2005 and 2007, *Moksha* and *Ladli*, two books which examine the prejudice against women in traditional Indian society, were added, each with texts translated into Bengali and Hindi. Publications from the series are being distributed through a network of institutions concerned with human rights and the humanities, political and cultural groups and non-governmental organizations. They are distributed free of charge and brought to the attention of the media and relevant political representatives.

This group of thirty posters, based on Fazal Sheikh's research in India for his books *Moksha* and *Ladli*, is one of one thousand sets to be distributed to charities and non-governmental organizations across India working for the rights of women. It is supported by a Distribution Fellowship from the Open Society Institute, New York City, and made in collaboration with ActionAid India, based in Delhi, and the Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation, Paris.

USEFUL CONTACTS

Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan (AAA)
U-55/B, Lane-4, Shakarpur, New Delhi-110 092
Tel +91-11-22022440
Email rightshelter@hotmail.com

ActionAid India
Country office: R-7 Hauz Khas Enclave, New Delhi, 110 016
Tel: +91-11-40640500, Fax +91-11-41641891
www.actionaidindia.org

Action for Women and Child Development,
B-38/A, c/o Age Building, Vipin Garden, Uttam Nagar, New Delhi-110 059
Tel +91-11-25847367, Fax +91-11-25847367

Bal Vikas Dhara
B-118, Nanhey Park, Uttam Nagar, New Delhi-110 059
Tel +91-11-25332649, 26155867

HAQ: Centre for Child Rights
208 Shahpur Jat, New Delhi-110 049
www.haqcrc.org

Jagori (women's resource center)
B-114, Shivalik, Malviya Nagar, New Delhi-110 017
www.jagori.org

The Open Society Institute (OSI) is a private operating and grant-making foundation that aims to shape public policy to promote democratic governance, human rights, and economic, legal, and social reform. In India, the Documentary Photography Project supports photographers whose work addresses social justice and human rights issues that coincide with OSI's mission.
www.soros.org

ActionAid is an international anti-poverty agency working in over forty-five countries, taking sides with poor people to end poverty and injustice together. In India ActionAid is working with some three hundred civil society organizations and over twelve million poor and excluded people in twenty-four states. Its focus is on the most marginalized groups: indigenous (tribal) communities, Dalits, Muslims, urban poor, people with disability and those living with HIV and Aids. The rights of women and girls are a priority in all areas of ActionAid's work.
www.actionaid.org
www.actionaidindia.org

The Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation (Fondation HCB) was established in 2002 to preserve the spirit and share the legacy of Henri Cartier-Bresson's work. The HCB Foundation Award is given every two years and offers an established photographer the opportunity to carry out a project that would otherwise be difficult to achieve.
www.henricartierbresson.org

Jagrut Mahila Sangathan
Near Grid, Lambhvel Road, Anand-388 001
Tel +91-2692-243218, 266045

Shakti Shalini
6/30 B, Jungpura B, New Delhi-110 014
Tel +91-11-24312483, Fax +91-11-24312431
Email shaktishalini@hotmail.com

Shakti Vahini
Headquarters, 307 Indraprastha Colony, Sector 30-33
Faridabad, Haryana 121008
www.shaktivahini.org

SOS Children's Villages of India
A-7 Nizamuddin West, New Delhi-110 013
www.soscvindia.org

United Nations Population Fund
www.unfpa.org

We Can End All Violence Against Women
www.wecanendvaw.org

In 2003, I visited the holy city of Vrindavan for the first time and saw some of the thousands of Hindu widows who live in its ashrams and on its streets. With the help of various organizations, I met some of these women and listened to the stories they told about their lives—how they had been married while they were still children, how their husbands had mistreated them, or left them, how they had been abused by their in-laws, relieved of their self-respect, lost their legal and economic rights. All this educated me about the vulnerability of women in traditional Indian society.



In 2005 I returned to India to start at the beginning, to find out, from childhood, what women have to suffer. Many of their experiences of subjugation are chilling, sometimes unbelievable. In many parts of India, a girl child is considered a burden; she will not be able to carry on the family name, and she will cost the family a great deal in the future, when a dowry will have to be offered to secure her a husband. The long-held cultural preference in India for boy children has led to hundreds of thousands of girls being neglected, abandoned or killed at birth or, with the advent of ultrasound scanning, aborted. Even now, when India is rapidly joining the first world economy, their very gender makes women the potential victims of a patriarchal system which tacitly condones their exploitation, mistreatment, even death. The portraits and personal testimonies included here come from many areas where women are at risk, and show ways in which they are being helped to a better future. I would like to thank all the women, young and old, who talked to me frankly about their lives in the hope that their stories would help others.



SANJEETA

The orphanage at Palna, run by the Delhi Council for Child Welfare, has a woven wicker crib at its gates, where parents can deposit their unwanted children without being identified. This is how Sanjeeta arrived at Palna. When a child is placed in the crib, a bell rings inside the orphanage to alert the staff. Most children are left in the middle of the night. The staff prefers that parents leave their children near a place of safety, even if they do so anonymously, rather than leaving them out in the open to die. In the twenty-five years since its foundation, Palna has been regularly visited by the police, who arrive with children found in dumpsters, left beside railway tracks and in fields. Many of them are so undernourished

and neglected they die after only a few days. Children are brought here for many reasons: because their parents cannot afford to raise them, by women who have conceived out of wedlock in a society that continues to stigmatize unmarried mothers; by couples who don't know how to cope with a child with severe disabilities. But the overwhelming majority are girls, left by parents who were hoping for a baby boy, and are not willing, or not able, to bear the burden of bringing up a girl. These girls will remain in care until they are of marriageable age, or, as happens more frequently now, they may be adopted by couples willing to take on a child who is not their own.



SUMANJIT

My mother, Hameer, was married at the age of twenty-one in an arranged marriage. After five years she was still unable to conceive. Then her first child came and it was a girl, my sister Sukjit, who is now seventeen. When my father saw her he was very disappointed, and after that my mother and father and Sukjit were asked by the in-laws to live on their own in one room, without the support of the family network. I was born a year later. My mother could feel the pressure increasing. All her brothers and sisters-in-law had sons, and she began to suffer from insecurity and depression. People had begun to pity her. Her extended family demanded an heir.

My parents' status in the household plummeted. My father was a manual worker and didn't have much money to support the family on his own. With the costs of school coming, my mother's brother took my mother and we two girls into his home. Then my mother was taken into hospital with depression. That was fifteen years ago, and still she has failed to conceive a son. My father has taken her to a series of disreputable doctors who only gave her drugs to alleviate her depression. In that time he has willingly allowed my uncle's family to take over caring for her. At the moment I live with my mother and my sister lives with our father.



TABLEEN

My parents already had three daughters and after the birth of my younger sister my mother, Mukhar Kaur, wanted to stop trying to have children. Her in-laws were abusing her and her eldest sister-in-law, who had two sons, treated us as though we were outcasts. But my father wanted a son, so they kept on trying. Then my father lost his job, and my parents felt even more pressure to have a son. My mother conceived a fourth time and decided to go for a test and found that it was a girl. She told me later that she wanted to abort the child, but finally decided that she could not go through with

it. She thought maybe she could give away the baby or abandon her, but in the end she decided to keep my sister. Anything else would have been a sin. When my grandparents died, our home and everything in it went to my uncles, who had sons of their own who could later inherit and carry on the family name. It is true that we girls will one day be married and may go away to live with our husbands' families when sons would stay and take care of their parents. This is their great value for the people. But my mother says that it is better to have a good daughter than a useless son.



LABHUBEN

One of the long-term results of sex-selective abortion is that in some areas of India there is such a shortage of girls of marriageable age that parents resort to buying wives for their sons. These women, who come largely from tribal groups and impoverished families in states such as Assam, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Bangladesh, are trafficked by agents, or handed over voluntarily by families so poor that selling a daughter has become an option. In this booming market, traffickers will sell women for the price of a cow, and she will be treated worse. In many cases a wedding ceremony never takes place, and the woman is used as a sex slave, then resold, or shared with her owner's brothers after she has borne him a male

heir. Among the Patel community, the problem has become so great that families have developed a system of barter marriages, known as 'sata lagna', in which one family offers a son in marriage to another family, on condition that the second family has a son willing to marry his prospective sister-in-law's sister. The principle is, basically: 'I'll marry your sister, if you'll marry mine.' The deals are made when the children are very young, and the girls then are kept at home until they reach the age when they can marry, usually at puberty. Labhuben, who is five years old, has already been bartered to another family, along with her seventeen-year-old brother.



KAVITA

We came on our own by train four months ago. Both our parents work on the land in Gujarat. When we arrived in Delhi we rented a shack in the slums. We pay seven hundred rupees a month. We begin around eight o'clock in the morning and stay until the evening, on the same intersection, performing gymnastics for the cars and begging for money. If we are lucky, we make sixty rupees between us. It is enough to get by and to pay for our room. When we have saved enough money, then we will take a train back to Gujarat to visit our parents. We will try to go during *holi*, the festival of colors, and stay for one month. But we must bring money home and if that money is not enough, then we will have

to return to Delhi, because we have nothing to contribute to the family. This cycle keeps us coming back to Delhi. There is nothing for us at home and the girls are nothing more than a burden. Some people are worried that we don't go to school, but without enough to eat, how can we consider going to school? We know there is no way we will be able to stay in Gujarat near our parents. In the meantime, my dream is to become an acrobat with the circus in order to secure a future for the family. We decided to come to Delhi without even knowing what would be here. Many other people from our region are doing this kind of work, and we hoped we would be able to make our way.



SONI

We go to the market and buy bundles of roses for five hundred or six hundred rupees. They will last for two days if we are careful to water them and keep them covered with rags. Then we divide them and mix them with greens to make bunches that the younger girls can sell among the traffic. The bunches cost ten rupees and if we are lucky, after two days, we might have earned almost two hundred rupees from selling them. Our parents are from Rajasthan and they were living here on the side of the road for fifteen years until they went back home last year and left us to take their place.

Sometimes the police come and harass us, but we just stay here without bribing them. After all, we have nothing to give them and they know it. Two years ago, I was hit by a car. The driver just drove on. I was taken to the hospital but even now the wound has not healed. Every so often, when there is a wedding, or at the end of a long year, we might go back to Rajasthan and visit our parents and our village. But those visits are rare, because if we spend time away from the street it means we will soon be without money.



KUMKUM

Kumkum's mother, Neesha Sharma, was thrown out of her in-laws' house after her husband left her because she failed to give him a male heir. She described what happened.

My youngest daughter, Kumkum, was only a few days old when they threw us out. Months later I went back to the home to see if my husband had returned, but he had not. Since there was no sign of him, the family told me that I have no rights in that home. For

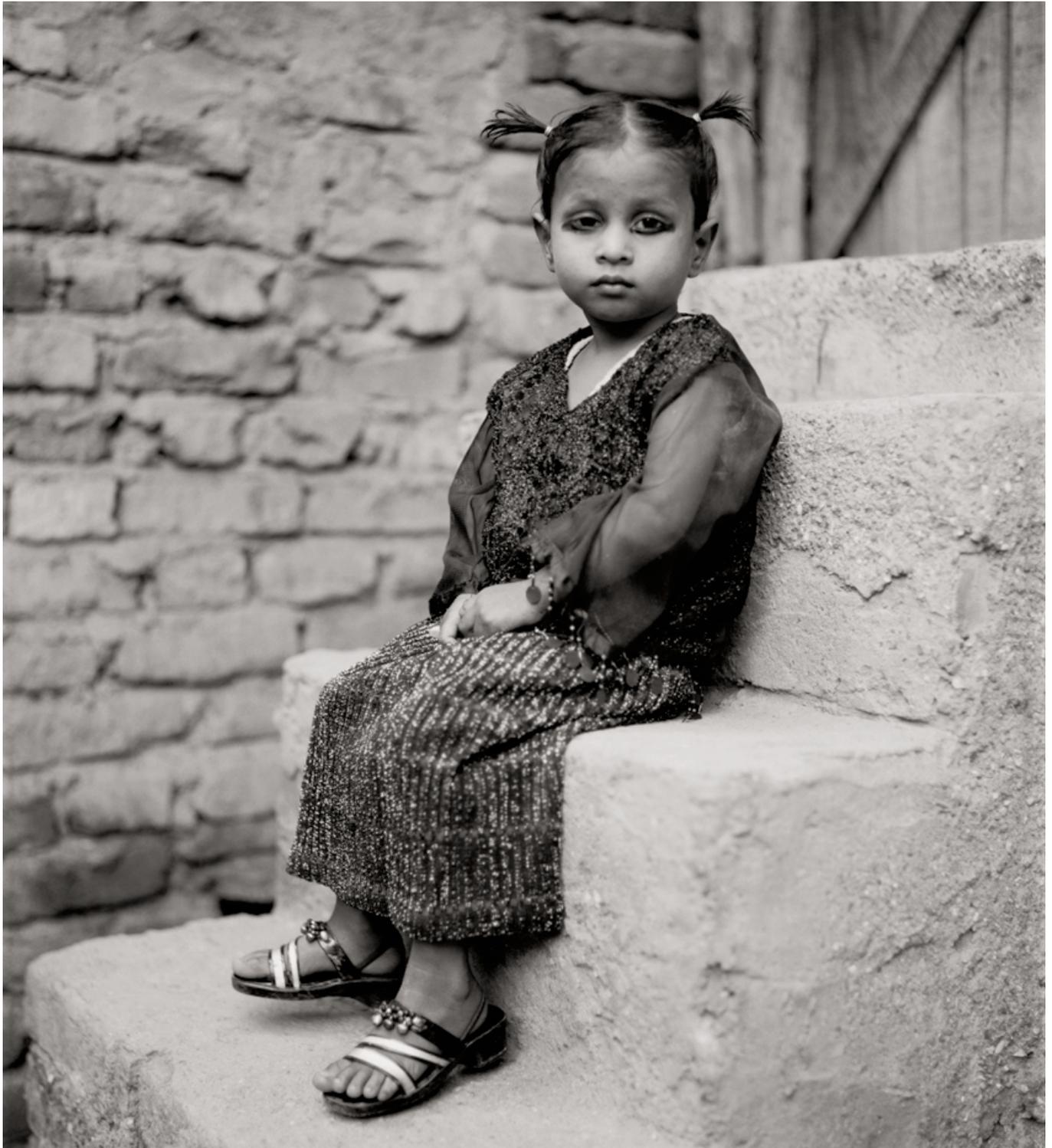
this reason, I decided that the only chance for my survival would be to come here to the shelter. It was at the Bangla Sahib *gurdwara*, our religious meeting house, that I asked a friend to help and he brought me to the homeless shelter at Palita Dam. I have been here for more than a year now. At least we are safe and my daughter can go to school. If Kumkum had been a boy, my husband would have been happy. He wanted a son in the house.



SIMRAN

Any estimate for the number of homeless people in India's cities comes with the caveat that it is probably an under-estimate—particularly the number of homeless women. But whatever the total, for the individual, homelessness means complete invisibility. Homeless people are not considered as official citizens, and therefore not eligible for identity papers, ration cards, education or health services. Young girls, such as Simran, are at particular risk, not only from illness and starvation, but from physical and sexual violence. In Delhi, there are estimated to be at least ten thousand women living on the streets. Despite this, of the shelters

that do exist, few are safe for women on their own. Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan (AAA), a project set up by ActionAid and supported by the government, had, at the time of my visit, nine centers in Delhi. The majority are for men, but one provides shelter and healthcare for lone women, single mothers, their children and the disabled. AAA lobbies the government on behalf of the homeless and one of its successes has been winning the right to allow forty-two children to enroll in school, since they can now give the shelter as a verifiable address. Simran is one of these children; she has found a home in the shelter, and is now going to school.



TAMANA

Tamana lives in a government resettlement camp about forty kilometers from the center of Delhi, next to the city's main garbage-dumping ground at Bhalaswa Dairy. The camp is a mixture of wooden shacks and houses of mud and brick. Most families live in one room, though some have been able to construct precarious steps to reach a second floor. The alleyways between the houses are choked with people trying to do their domestic chores. There is no electricity and no internal plumbing. The government built public bathrooms with toilets and showers, but these were never cleaned as promised and became overrun with refuse and excrement, so the residents took to relieving themselves in the open. This posed a risk to women and girls in particular, since they walked to a 'safe' distance where they could not be seen and

so risked being attacked. The incidence of rape and assault has grown to a serious level. For many families the move here has been disastrous. A man employed as a laborer can no longer walk to work, but has to travel over thirty kilometers to and from the site each day. Labor is cheap, and easily replaced, so many men have lost their jobs along with their homes. The same problems apply to women. Even if they can afford to travel to and from their jobs as domestic workers, they face the risk of being on the streets unaccompanied. And for children who were at school, it is now virtually impossible to get there and back in a day, and since parents are unwilling to run the risk of their daughters being assaulted or kidnapped on the journey, most children have been forced to quit school altogether.



RUKSANA

One of the by-products of Delhi's new prosperity is the growth of residential developments gradually taking over the former slums and shanty towns in the city, which are being evacuated and bulldozed to the ground. The area known as 'Jai Hind' (it means 'Victory India') was settled five years ago, when its population was forced out from another slum nearby. Those with proof of residency or Indian citizenship were offered a strip of land thirty kilometers away, at a cost of seven thousand rupees for a five- to ten-year lease. Most had no documents, and among those who did, few could gather such a sum together. They had little choice but to become homeless. As they searched for a new place to squat, the owner of a nearby farm agreed to rent them some land. Now Jai Hind is home to between four and five thousand squatters, each paying a portion of the overall rent. In a typical family the husband will be a manual

worker, earning around two thousand rupees a month; his wife will go out to do domestic work, usually for two or three families in one day, maybe making a thousand rupees a month in all. The job of looking after the home falls to the younger girls, who are left at home until they are old enough to go out to work. There is little opportunity for schooling; instead children are sent out to earn a pittance picking rags. Ruksana is eight and lives with her family in a Delhi slum settlement. Each morning she leaves home at four or five in the morning with a group of pickers to reach the garbage dumps around the city. After a morning spent crawling over the heaps, she will sit and sort through her pickings, dividing them into separate bundles—plastic bottles, metal, rubber, paper—before handing them over to a middleman who will dole out her pay. On average, a day's load is worth between thirty and fifty rupees.



PRITI

I was studying when we lived in the slums in Delhi and I was doing well. I was in the fourth standard. Then, during my exams, the government came and leveled our home. We were evicted under threat of force. This was 2002, when our whole neighborhood was destroyed. It was so traumatic that several older members of the community died during the demolition. We protested for some time, but they began the demolition anyway. It was during the winter and it took us a further three days just to find the land at Bhalaswa Dairy on which we were to stay. At the time there was nothing here, only the barren patch of land that stretched away from the dumping ground. There was no school at all for the first

two years and during that time we tried to make do with a tent that could double as a school. In 2006, a proper school was opened, but in between the children lost two years of schooling. I am sixteen, the eldest daughter in my family, and since the move I have been unable to return to school. My father was so upset by the eviction that he has been overcome by depression. My mother works, and so does my sister, who is thirteen, even though it is illegal. Together, they make a total of a thousand rupees a month, working every day of the week. There are nine of us altogether, and this is all we have to live on. I don't think that I will ever go back to school. What good is an education when there is no way to use it?



RANI

Rani—her name means ‘queen’—is three. Her mother is a sex worker in Delhi’s red light district on GB Road. Many of the women there have children, who have to be brought up alongside them as they work. As babies, they are put to sleep under the bed while their mother deals with the customer. As they get older, the children are sent to play in the street during the day, and young girls in particular are at risk from pimps and brothel owners who want to force them into sex work. For the past two years, Rani has been attending a school on GB Road, set up by a social worker, Lalitha Nayak, and a co-worker, Shakuntala. It is open from eight in the morning to seven in the evening, and between those hours

mothers can drop off their children whenever they wish. Many children are malnourished and neglected, and the teachers in the school use touch therapy to remedy some of their problems. Rani’s mother has been a sex worker since she was eighteen. When Rani reaches nine or ten, she, like many of the other girls, will be sent to a hostel far away from GB Road to be educated. In some cases, the mothers aren’t told where their children have gone, in case their pimps find out. One of Rani’s school friends said she wanted to be a policewoman when she grew up, so that no man could touch her mother again. ‘I could either arrest him or shoot him directly. I would have the power to decide.’



REKHA

I am from Madhya Pradesh, where all our family work in the fields. I am thirteen, the youngest of five. I was on the way to my uncle's home by bus. My father had given me a hundred rupees for the journey. A man on the bus took me to his house for the night. The next day, he put me on a train and I arrived here in Haryana and met someone who handed me over to the police. I have been in this shelter for a month now.

Rekha is being looked after in a women's hostel run by volunteers from Shakti Vahini, an NGO which investigates the trafficking of women and girls. The organization is active across the whole spectrum of human rights, social and health care, particularly in the prevention of HIV. Members of Shakti Vahini make interventions into brothels, helping girls who want to leave sex work.



POLI

Poli is sixteen. She comes from a poor family in Bengal, the eldest of three sisters. Her parents were agricultural workers and none of the children went to school. One day, a family friend said he could find work for her in a local factory. She could earn four hundred rupees a week. He said he would take her there and there was no need to tell her parents, since she would be back home by the evening.

This man took me on a train and gave me tea. I thought we would only be going two or three stops and then get off, since we were on a local train. When I started to get nervous and complained, he threatened to throw me off the train. I started to cry. Eventually, we arrived in Delhi and he took me to a tiny enclosed room where there was an old man. He told me to go with the old man and slapped

me when I refused. He threatened to kill me if I didn't co-operate. He took my bag and all I had with me. He had sold me to the old man, who beat me for two days and kept me locked in the small room. When I told him I needed to go to the bathroom, I got the chance to run away. I met someone on the road who took me to the police station and they called the shelter. I have been here for a month now and they have contacted my father and even given him money for his train fare to come and collect me. The people here have told me that they will go back to my village to find my uncle and, through him, the man who kidnapped me and sold me. I have cried for the whole month, but now I have this news of my father's arrival, I can smile again.



SONALI

Sonali is fourteen, and comes from Bihar in eastern India. Several months ago she was found wandering in a village near Karnal, her clothes soaked in blood, after she had been brutally raped. The attack was so traumatic it affected her mentally and she was taken to a shelter and given counseling to help her recover. She was helped by a non-governmental organization which traced her family and sent a representative to tell them what had happened to their daughter. He was sent with a photograph of Sonali to prove

her identity. But when he arrived in Bihar, and spoke to her mother and father, they denied that they had ever had such a daughter. Sonali stayed in the shelter while members of the organization tried to prove that the couple in Bihar were her parents and force them to take her back. As she had no documents, her relationship to them was difficult to prove. I was told that Sonali had cried for two months to go back home but now she had stopped. She seemed to know that her parents had rejected her.



KRISHNA

I was given to my husband in an arranged marriage. Once we were married, he began to drink heavily. A year later I had my first daughter, Komal. When I was pregnant a second time, my in-laws began to abuse me, saying I was only good for producing girls. They insisted I get a scan to determine the sex of the child. I knew they would force me to have an abortion if the baby was a girl, so I refused. This drove them to such fury that they put wires on my belly and plugged the other end into the socket. I was lucky the fuse blew, or I would have died. When I still refused, they sent me to my parents' home, where my daughter Nena was born. Then my mother-in-law died and I was allowed to return my in-laws' house, but they continued to taunt and beat me. The government had given us five hundred rupees for our first child as part of its policy to encourage families to keep their girls. My husband drank the money away. The police came to the house

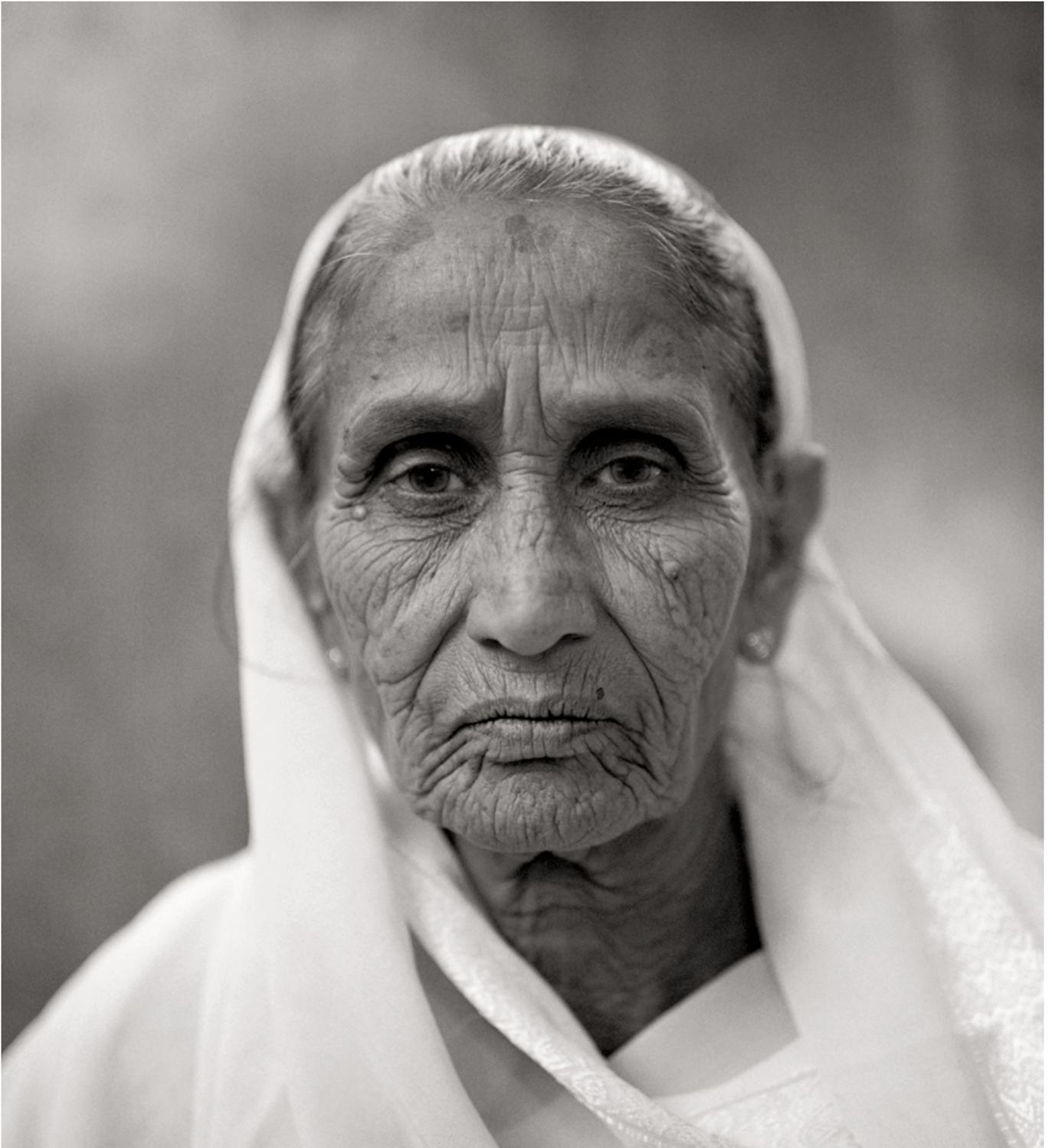
after I had been beaten and I went to the local elders for help, but they sent me home and never recorded the complaints. My husband told me that if I went to the police, he would kill me. Then I became pregnant again. I refused to get the scan. My husband was usually violent when he was drunk, but one day, when he was sober, he told me to leave home or he would kill me. I had nowhere to go and I had the children with me. That day he tried to hang me with my *dupatta* [scarf]. He wrapped one end round my neck and the other over a pipe in the wall. He pulled me up until I lost consciousness. But my neighbors heard my screams and came to rescue me. After that, the Health Ministry ordered that we be moved from the house. I am now being helped by a non-governmental agency which is handling my case. They are trying to get my husband to be financially responsible for us, otherwise we will have nothing.



SITA

Eleven years ago, when my father was still alive, my parents arranged a marriage for me. At the time, they felt fortunate to have found a man from Nepal who would marry me without any dowry. I didn't meet my husband until the day we were married. After my father died, my husband allowed my mother to live with us. We were living in a small village where we rented a place for very little money. I had my first child six years ago, and soon, another daughter, who is now three and a half. When I was pregnant with my third child, I went through a really painful labor, but my husband refused to call anyone to help. The baby died during the delivery. It was another girl. Soon after that, my husband began

beating me. I got pregnant again and several months later I gave birth to a girl. My husband yanked the baby out of my arms and severely beat my mother and me. He took the baby and the other two children and we later learned that he had drowned them in the river. That same day our landlord brought us to the hospital and then to this shelter. We will stay here until we have recovered. People from the village have been to visit us and they will help us. The police have registered a charge against my husband for the murder of our children and for beating us, but I don't think they will find him. Even if they did, he would escape blame. Our only hope is that he stays away.



SHAHJAHAN

My daughter Noorjahan was married into a family we knew. Salim seemed a gentle boy and we were pleased. We are Muslims, but our community has adopted the practice of dowry. Salim's family asked us to pay twenty-one thousand rupees. We also gave clothes and items for the house. When they married, Salim was twenty-five and Noorjahan was sixteen. Eleven months later, Salim's parents asked us for more money. I was able to give something, but not what they demanded. This soon became clear to them. On the day of her death, some children came running to tell me that there was smoke coming from my daughter's house. I rushed there and tried to get inside, but her brother-in-law pushed me to the ground. I grew hysterical. My sister got inside the house and saw that Noorjahan was on fire, but by the time she could wrap a quilt around her she was already

dead. We carried the body to the police station with a large crowd yelling for justice. At first the police arrested the family, but they soon set them free; someone had clearly bribed them. We fought in hearings for three years after her death. Often I was the only one in the room. As it dragged on, the details seemed to slip further and further away. Even my family pleaded with me to stop. Through it all, the only thought that kept me going was that if I didn't fight for my daughter, no one else would. Then, one day, I closed the case. I resolved to use the death of my daughter as the impetus to fight for the rights of others. Noorjahan died on June 17, 1979. Three years later I began working for Shakti Shalini. We try to save women from what my daughter suffered. There is a saying in Hindi: *Meri shakti, meri beti*, which means, 'My strength is my daughter.'



ASHA

My husband and I were happy at first, but when I couldn't give him a child he began to beat me. Then he took another wife and we all lived together in the same house. A few months later I found out I was pregnant with a boy. This made the second wife very jealous. We carried on like this for two years until my husband fell sick and died. By this time I was pregnant again and had another boy, which only made the other wife even more jealous. One afternoon she crept into the room where I was asleep with the baby and set fire to the bed. The smoke woke me up and I started to scream. The neighbors rushed in but it was too late and my son burned to death. My brothers-in-law beat the woman and threw her out of the house, but she was never arrested or held responsible for what she had

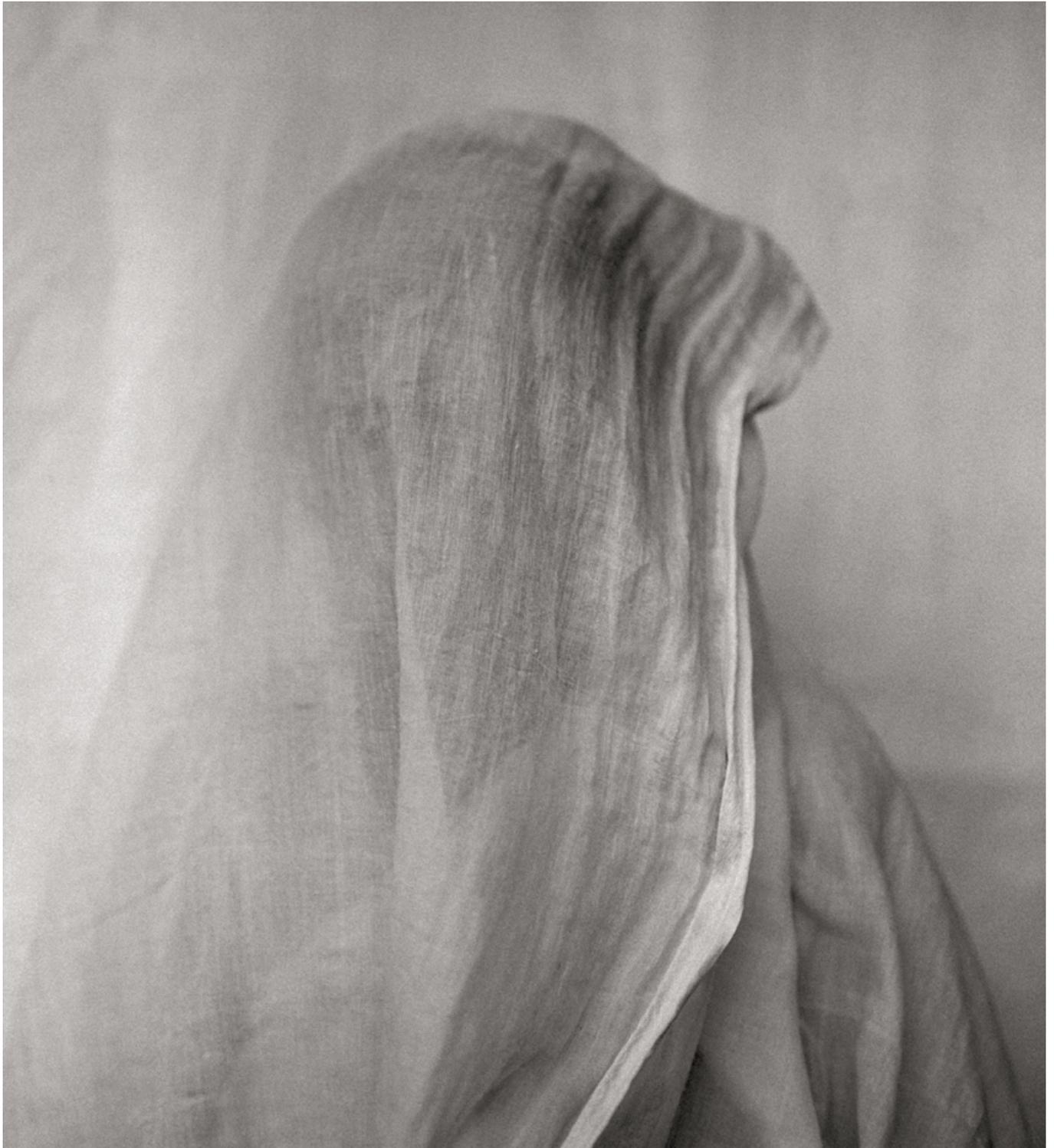
done. I suffered fifty-percent burns all over my body and my mother had to sell all her land to pay the hospital fees. The doctors wanted to amputate my hands because they were so badly burned, but my mother pleaded with them and eventually they agreed not to do it and I was left with these hands that still do not open. It took me two years to recover. In all this time, my son was being looked after by his uncles. Later, when my son got married, he and my daughter-in-law wanted me to live with them, but my body had been so badly burned I was still in a lot of pain, and I knew it upset them to see me suffering, so I decided to come and live in Vrindavan. I still visit them, but I have no desire to live with them.



LAKSHMI

I had a friend who made a love marriage—which was rather unusual at that time. When a marriage is not arranged by the parents, the husband does not get a dowry from his bride's family. This seemed to make my friend's husband so angry after they were married that he set his wife alight. She died from her burns. If love can do such a thing, then how can it have any meaning? After that I vowed marriage would never be for me. Since then I have seen what happens to many girls after their marriages, how their in-laws

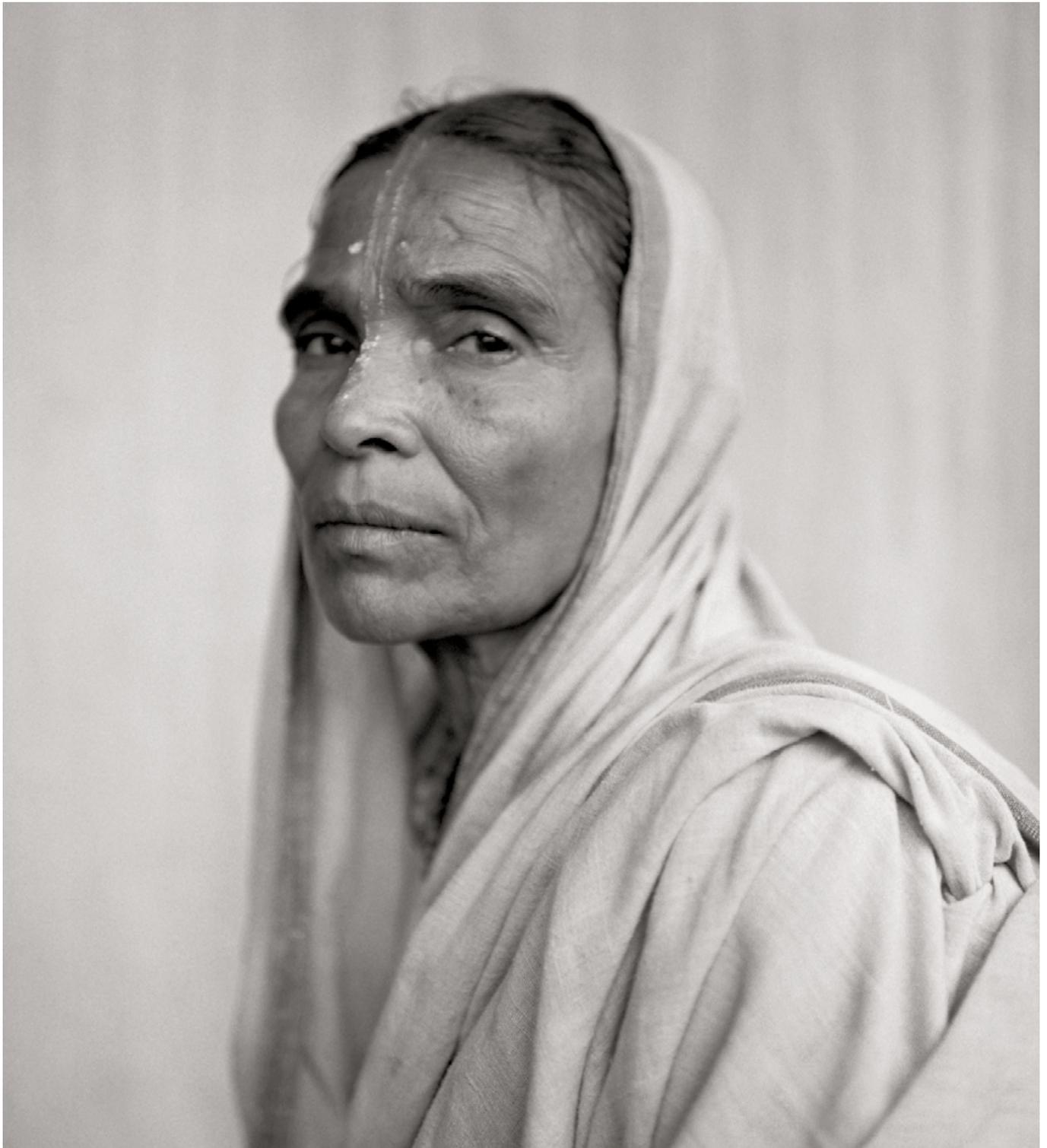
tease and abuse them, and I have never regretted my decision. My mother died when I was fourteen and I set out traveling then and soon grew to love it. I visited all the holy places. But when I reached Vrindavan I felt something here that made me never want to leave. I am forty-five now and have never been married, but I live among the widows in the ashram as a sister. Radha is living in my soul, and with her there, Krishna must also certainly come. I have few dreams other than to live here in Vrindavan in their company.



NEELA

I was lucky in my marriage. My husband and his mother always treated me with kindness. We raised two sons and saw both of them married while we lived together contentedly for forty years. But after my husband died, my elder son informed me that I could live anywhere I wanted—in fact he was telling me to leave the house. His wife disliked me and wanted me out of the way. I understood that I had become a burden to my son and it was best to go. I left at once, taking nothing with me, aware that I might never see any of them again. I did go back, a few months later, but they asked me what I was doing there and the message was clear: I should stay away.

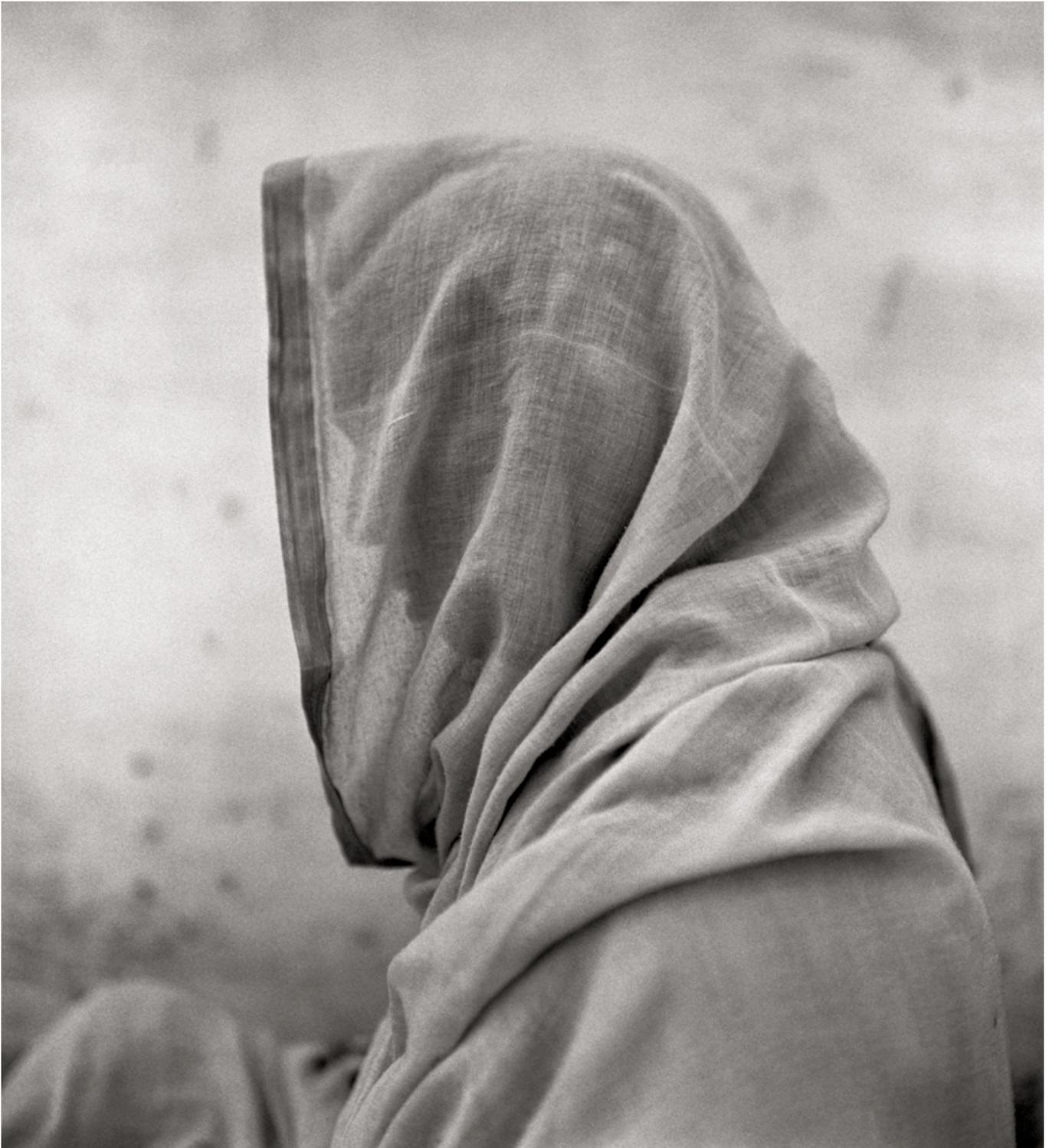
So I came to Vrindavan. Here we are so determined in our devotion that everything else in the world is dead to us. We ourselves are dead and living with Krishna. Sometimes Krishna comes to me while I am sleeping and takes my sari and touches me or plays with me. I see him clearly and I want only to talk to him, only to see him. I can go to the Yamuna as often as I please and bathe with his spirit. I never dream of my family. I am seventy years old and all I want now is *moksha* and freedom from this cycle of death and rebirth that has caused me such pain.



SEVA

My husband was a carpenter who made little money. We had three daughters and a son together and then, after thirteen years of marriage, my husband died. Our second son was born soon after my husband's death, but he died when he was a teenager. I had to beg for money for my daughters' marriages. I dealt with all the arrangements for the weddings, but I couldn't afford their dowries, so I was lucky that their husbands' families agreed to take them without any payment. For three years I lived with my youngest daughter and her husband, and then my son-in-law told me I had to leave, he would not take responsibility for me any more. My

daughter didn't want me to go, but what could she do? It was his home, and she had no say in the decision. So five years ago I came to Vrindavan. I used to visit my daughters once a year, but now I don't want to see them. I am satisfied that I have done my duty well, and though I miss them, I don't want to be a burden to them. In my dreams my son comes to me and tells me he wanted to live in this world but my god would not give him permission. I don't want to dream of him again because the pain of his loss was too great. No one can understand what is in my heart. I pray that after my death I will meet my husband and son once again.



SHANTI

My family was very poor so my only chance of a husband was to be given to an older man. He was fifty and I was twelve. When they told me I was going to be married I didn't even know the meaning of the word, I only knew I had to make these sacrifices for the sake of my family. At twenty I had my first child, and then three more. The first son left as soon as he was married. My second son was feeble-minded and didn't marry. I still had two unmarried daughters at home when my husband died twelve years ago. Since my sons refused to help me, and I was still young enough, I went out to work in the fields to raise money for my daughters' marriages. Once they were gone, I began to beg. I wrote to my son asking for

help but he never replied. I don't know why this has happened to me. I cared for both my sons, but neither of them has done anything to care for me in my old age. I ask myself, why has God given me this great pain? At first I wanted to kill myself but then I realized that Lord Krishna would look after me. I came to Vrindavan with nothing five years ago. There are many people here with grief in their hearts and I know I am not alone. I have no wish to return to Bengal. I will not speak to my children again. It is because of Lord Krishna and the company of these other women that I still have my sanity. You have two eyes. If you want to see paradise, you will find it here in Vrindavan.



RAJESHWARI

When my son got married I began working in a restaurant in Puri. I didn't want to live with him. I had begun chanting and had the feeling I was ready to leave everything behind. I heard a man in Puri singing about this place called Vrindavan: 'When I go to Vrindavan and beg there, everything will be peaceful.' So I decided to go and see for myself. My guru gave me his blessing. I left with five hundred rupees and nothing else and came directly here. That was sixty years ago. When I first arrived I lived in an ashram and went to chant in the Bhajan Ashram. I put my money in the bank, but somebody stole it. Now I have nothing, but I am happy here.

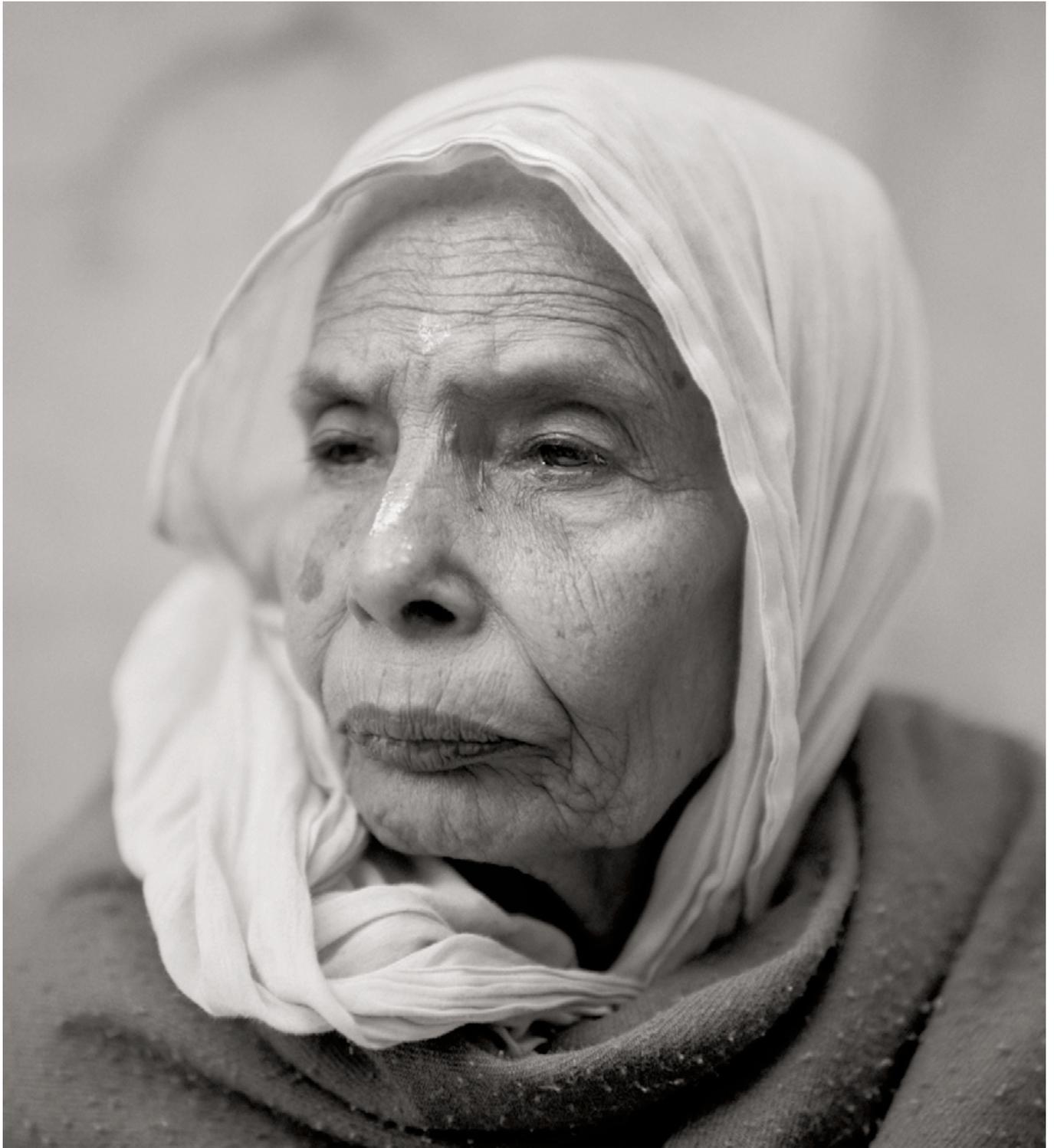
My second son died six months after his marriage. I only found this out three years later. I think he committed suicide because of his inability to satisfy his wife's need for money. Everyone comes into my dreams: my family, my friends, my Krishna. My mother-in-law comes to me in my dreams and asks me to take care of her as I did before. My husband enters my dreams but he never speaks to me, only looks at me silently from afar. I am now eighty years old, but I have no worries about the future. Krishna will provide for me. I live here contentedly with my pet rats, Chuni and Muni.



MENKA

One morning, my husband went out to bathe in the river and slipped and fell into the water. He couldn't swim and he drowned. My youngest son was only one and a half then and I went to work at the handloom to earn money. I could make three or four saris in one day. Now, after thirty-five years, with my sons married and my eyesight failing, I have no choice but to live in Vrindavan. I must have done something wrong in my life for this to happen to my

husband. I see him again and again in my dreams, falling into the water, calling out to me for help. You see it was my fault. I was the one who pulled him out of the water. He couldn't swim and I could. I rarely speak about this to others. It is too painful. I have sacrificed my life for whatever wrong I have done and now, at sixty-five, I want only to focus on Krishna. He will protect and nurture me. I trust and give myself over to him completely.



JAMUNA

We were living in Bengal and my son was only a year old when my husband died. But we were a joint family and I also took care of my brother-in-law's sons. So when my son moved to Vrindavan many years later, I stayed behind with the nephews in Bengal. Then the dam flooded our lands and we lost everything. Our family was scattered and I finally came to Vrindavan to live with my son. By this time he had been living here for twenty years. At first I lived with his

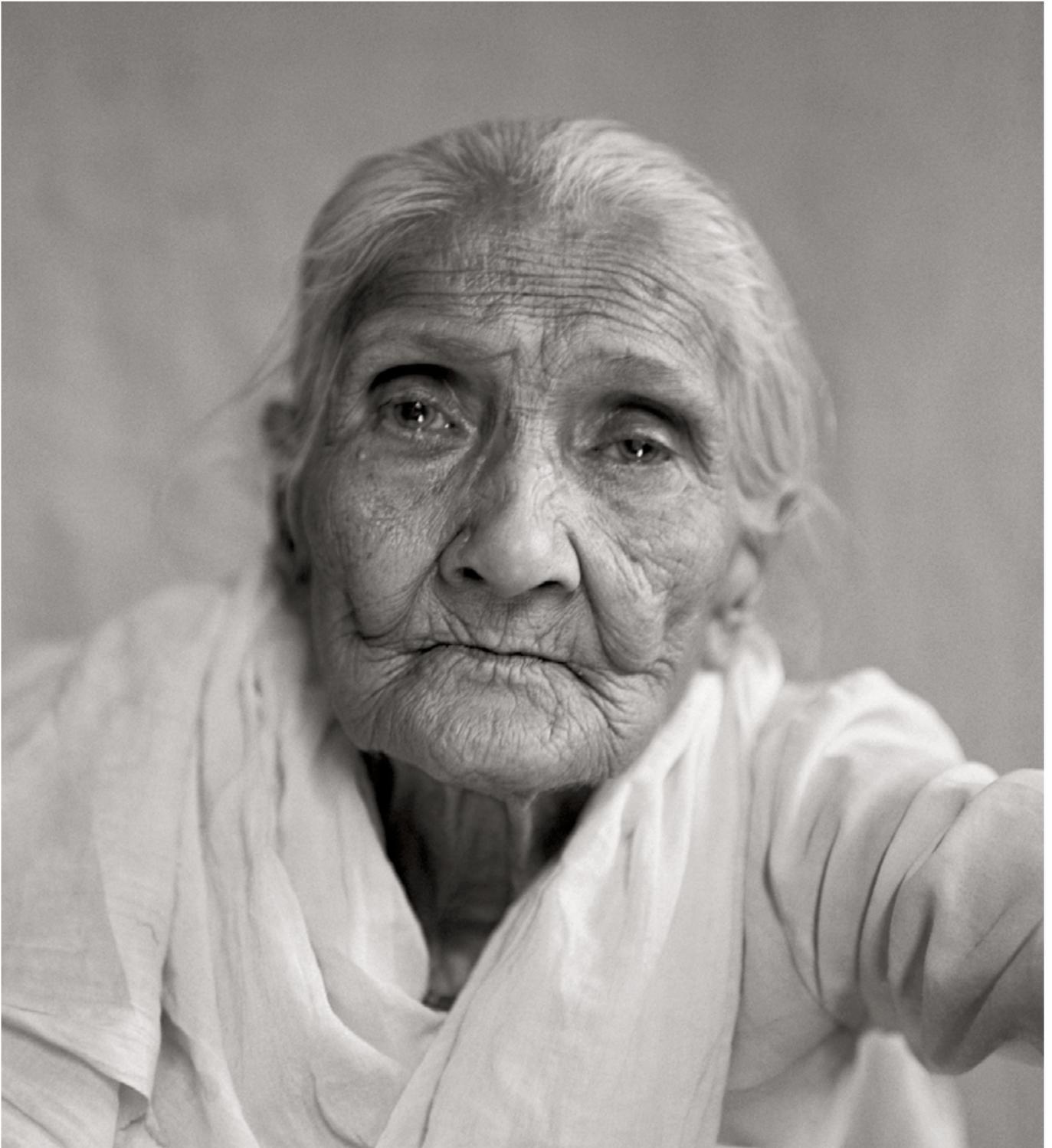
family but was soon forced to move out and came to the ashram. Now I spend most of my time in the home for old people. My daughter-in-law sometimes comes to visit me when my son is working at his tea stall, but those visits are rare. My only hope in life is that my son will be happy with his family. For myself, I no longer have need of a family. Krishna is father, mother, son and daughter. He is husband to me. If my son called for me, I would go back to them.



SARLA

My husband died of a fever six months after we were married. He was twelve years old. I was only five. His family said I was an unlucky person and was to blame for his death. I was never taken into their household because they did not want me to bring them the same ill fate. So even though the marriage had never been consummated

there was no chance I could ever be married again and I have carried this stigma for the rest of my life. After my parents died I lived with my brothers for many years, but they, too, died and thirty years ago, at the age of fifty, I moved to Vrindavan, where I have lived with the other widows ever since.



SUNITI

My husband was a doctor. We were both from good families and in the fifteen years we were married we had very few problems. We educated all our children, four sons and a daughter, and when my husband died I went to work in a government company. My eldest son was thirteen when his father died. Today he is an engineer. I arranged the marriages of all my children, and I lived with them for ten years after my retirement. But then I decided it was time to come to Vrindavan. I had been here once with my husband and I always

remembered the tranquility of the place. That was fifteen years ago. I was already seventy years old. I lived with Kundo Lata, the head of the Bhajan Ashram, and chanted there. I knew I had to forget my husband so that I could chant and devote everything to Krishna. When I had a fever, Krishna comforted me, telling me I would soon recover. He asked me if I was sad and I said no. He told me he was with me and he would protect me. He loves me too much. There is nothing left in me, everything is Krishna's. He asks me to wear his *tulsi* rosary.



ABALA

Although my husband was twenty years older than me, I can say that, once I adjusted to life with him, I was truly happy during our years together. It was a long time before I gave birth to our first child, a daughter, but then we had two more daughters and a son. We had already married off two of the daughters by the time my husband died, but I was left alone with our youngest girl. We were refugees from Bangladesh, and as a single woman alone with a child I faced many problems. One day I was told about Vrindavan. We came here thinking we would be able to beg for a living, but soon I started to chant at the ashram for money and food. Two years later

a local man came to ask for my daughter and I agreed. They were married and she moved into his home. They had one son together but then they found that my daughter had cancer. She died nine years ago. I am eighty now, and every day I am visited by a monkey who calls me 'Ma', I know this monkey is calling me in just the same way my daughter did. It is the reincarnation of my girl. My grandson, her son, lives nearby and on the days that he visits me we wait for the monkey to come. No one else will take care of me now, but Krishna will come. He is the one who called us here. My dreams are only of him.



SAJEDA

In India's main cities, every six hours, a married woman is burned to death, beaten to death, or driven to suicide by emotional abuse from her husband. The most common causes are disputes over the wife's dowry or her failure to produce a male heir. Many women die in 'stove burnings', fires concocted to look like domestic accidents. The Dowry Prohibition Act, introduced in 1961, has received several amendments to make punishment more severe, but it is rarely enforced and a dowry continues to be a cultural imperative for families wishing to marry off their daughters. A new law introduced in 2005 recognizes emotional, verbal and economic abuse of a woman by her husband as a crime, and marks for the first time the crime of marital rape. The law gives the abused wife

the right to stay in the conjugal home; in the past she was often thrown out and left destitute. In 2005 the UN Population Fund reported that seventy percent of women believed wife-beating was justified under certain circumstances, including refusal to have sex or preparing dinner late. Sajeda suffered physical abuse from her husband for many years until she finally fled to a women's shelter. Until recently, women who were subject to domestic violence had few outlets for their grievances. At least now there are a growing number of organizations in different parts of India where women can go to find protection, legal support and education, which eventually provides them with a job and therefore with some measure of independence.