

These paragraphs and sentences are from a National Geographic Magazine article about widows. Teachers, please follow these steps with each paragraph.

a-Have a student read the selection all at once.

b-Have a different student read through the paragraph one sentence at a time, paying attention to punctuation and expression. You can read sentences they struggle with to show them the rhythm and pronunciation

c-Ask a different student to turn their paper over and tell what the paragraph means.

d-Answer the questions.

1. It was 5:30 AM, a cool dawn, a sliver moon. A few widows had wrapped themselves in colorful saris, but most wore white, in India the surest signifier of a woman whose husband has died, perhaps recently, perhaps decades ago. In the dim light they moved like schools of fish, still hurrying together, pouring around street corners, a dozen here, two dozen there.

What is a “sliver”? What is a sliver moon? What does the author mean by “surest signifier”.

2. Vrindavan is a city of widows. Some reports estimate two or three thousand, others ten thousand or more; the city and its neighboring towns are a spiritual center, crowded with temples to the Hindu god Krishna and ashrams in which bhajans -devotional songs-are chanted all day long by impoverished widows who crowd side by side on the floor. The sanctity of bhajan ashrams is sustained by steady chanting, and although this is nominally the role of pilgrims and priests, the widows earn hot meals, and perhaps nighttime sleeping mats, by singing these chants over and over, sometimes three or four hours at a time.

- A. Is there a town or city in your country that is known as a spiritual center? Describe it.
- B. What is chanting? What are devotional songs? Do you know any devotional songs by heart?
- C. What does impoverished mean?
- D. What does this phrase mean, “the sanctity of bhajan ashrams is sustained by steady chanting”?
- E. What does nominally mean?
- F. What is a pilgrim?
- G. Do you think you would be able to chant a devotional song over and over for 3 or 4 hours at a time? What if you were very old? Would you be willing to do this to get a meal and a sleeping mat?

3. Vrindavan is about 100 miles south of Delhi, but the widows come here from all over India, particularly the state of West Bengal, where allegiance to Krishna is intense. Sometimes they arrive accompanied by gurus they trust. Sometimes their relatives bring them, depositing the family widow in an ashram or on a street corner and driving away.

- A. What does allegiance mean?
- B. Who deposits something in this paragraph?
- C. Can you imagine dropping off your widowed grandmother on a street corner or in an ashram?

- D. How are widows treated in poorer, rural areas of your country?
- E. In some Native American cultures, older people would sometimes be left behind when the tribe migrated if they were not able to keep up. This seems harsh to us, but perhaps it increased the odds of survival for the group. What do you think about this?
- F. Do you think the treatment of widows is a big societal issue?

4. She sat cross-legged atop the bedsheet, even though her limbs were contorted by age and disease and she was able to walk only by bending over almost double and shuffling. Her white sari was draped loosely over the top of her head; in India the shearing of a new widow's hair was once common practice, to announce the end of her womanly appeal, and the widow Adhikari appeared to have been recently reshorn. "I keep it this way because my hair was his," she said, and squinted at her guests, the foreigner and the young interpreter, as though perplexed by the question. "A woman's greatest beauty is in her hair and her clothes. Once my husband was not there, what would I do with it?"

- A. Define the underlined words.
- B. Demonstrate: sitting cross-legged, walk bent over double, shuffling, squinting
- C. Demonstrate draping a pretend scarf loosely.
- D. Typically we think of shearing sheep. What does shearing mean here? What does reshorn mean?
- E. In some Native American cultures, women cut their hair off when their husbands didn't return from a hunting or war party. It was part of the grieving process. What do you think of this custom?
- F. If you were not married and not interested in being married, would you wear your hair or clothes differently?
- G. Do you think shearing widows hair is humiliating or does it honor them?

How did you feel when you read part of this article? Though this practice of dropping off widows at an ashram seems harsh to us, they could receive worse treatment in their village. What is a better solution to this problem?