

NRI trust assists 'poorest of the poor'

A London-based NRI founded a decade ago a trust that assists 3,610 widows and their children in Indian states and more in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Kenya and South Africa. To draw attention to their plight, the Loomba Trust worked to have June 23 declared as the International Day for Widows in 2005 by the wife of Tony Blair and a year later by the UN Secretary General at the first Diwali dinner at the UN by the trust.

Textile tycoon Raj Loomba founded the trust in memory of his mother Pushpa Wati Loomba, who became a widow at the young age of 37 and devoted herself to bringing up and educating her seven children. Raj selected June 23 as International Widows Day because his mother became a widow on that day.

To mark the 10th anniversary of the trust, a unique ceremony was held at India International Centre in [New Delhi](#) Saturday. The event attracted 300 widows and their 300 children from every state of India who were honoured by India's Minister for Women and Child Development Renuka Chowdhury, Raj and his wife Veena Loomba and L.M. Singhvi, former Indian high commissioner to Britain.

At the function, every child was presented with a school bag and a cheque for one year's school fees and every widow got a sari. Most children had travelled by train for the first time to reach New Delhi and so did some of the widows.

A recorded video report screened at this event showed Blair's wife Cherie launching a huge airship with the trust's message in London's Trafalgar Square a day earlier and appealing to people to assist widows and their children. Cherie said: 'Millions of women throughout the world find themselves impoverished and isolated by the death of their husband, and it is vital that we do whatever we can to support them and raise awareness of their plight. The stigma and low status of widows in developing countries often leads to children living in real poverty. International Widows Day will help the Loomba Trust and others secure a better future for poor widows and their children.'

In an emotional speech, Renuka Chowdhury promised all help to all widows and said the Indian government would soon announce measures to ameliorate the plight of widows and bring in regulations to stop shaving of their heads and wearing of only white clothes minus ornaments. A strong supporter of the trust, the minister attended a number of its fund-raising Diwali dinners in London, hosted by the mayor of London, and the first Diwali dinner at UN headquarters.

Sir Richard Branson, head of Virgin Group, supports 1,500 HIV and AIDS orphans in South Africa in a joint partnership with this trust. Early this year, the Youth Business International Network of the Prince of Wales Forum helped over 400 widows in the slums of Nairobi to start their micro-businesses with training courses, seed capital and mentoring. A similar project has been launched in Dhaka. In Sri Lanka, the trust is assisting tsunami- and violence-affected women-headed homes.

A glittering charity premiere of Deepa Mehta's 'Water' on the plight of widows was organised by the trust to raise funds. A Bollywood concert was held at Trafalgar Square last year. For its innovative and socially important projects, Asian Who's Who International named the Loomba Trust as the first Charity of the Year.

Beatle John Lennon's widow Yoko Ono has made a handsome donation to the trust. She said: 'Widowhood is still a taboo, more so than sex, money or politics. But it is not an issue to be swept under the rug. Give widows a chance.' The trust is doing just that.

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