



Victim: Phoolbai died of fever

How do I tell my kids their mum died in a mass operation?



Heartache: Roopchand with Narayan, Nikita and Ritesh

PHOTOGRAPH BY NEELUP REHMAN FOR THE ASIA PRESS

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AGONY OF INDIA'S STERILISATION DEATHS

EXCLUSIVE BY HELEN ROBERTS

A GRIEF-STRIKEN father of three has told of his family's devastation after his wife died in a mass sterilisation operation.

Roopchand Shrivastava says he is dreading the day he has to tell his children what happened to their mother.

His wife Phoolbai, 35, agreed to be sterilised as part of an Indian government campaign to curb population growth.

She had her free operation along with 130 women at a state-run surgical camp earlier this month.

But after returning home from her laparoscopic tubectomy Phoolbai's temperature soared. She and 14 other women died. Another 90 were seriously ill.

The cause is not yet known, but drugs used by the women are alleged to have been contaminated with rat poison. Two pharmaceutical suppliers and the doctor who carried out the surgeries have been arrested.

Roopchand, 45, told us he and Phoolbai thought it would be a routine operation that would make them more financially secure.

They agreed to it because they could only just afford to feed Narayan, nine, Nikita, three, and Ritesh, one, and send them to school. Roopchand said Phoolbai went to a sterilisation camp near Bilaspur, in Chhattisgarh, with a group of other women from their village.

"My wife was sent home with Ibuprofen and antibiotics," he said. "She seemed fine that night but in the early hours she started vomiting violently and complaining of aches and pains. I took her to our local health worker. Phoolbai was treated at

two hospitals but died on November 10. "My wife's death has shattered our lives," said Roopchand. "I cannot believe she is no more. My children are too young to understand what has happened. I cannot tell them their mother will never return. How do I tell them? I do not know how I will raise them alone."

"My wife was a very loving person. She would often do for others before herself. She was a perfect wife and quickly became a perfect mother. We never argued."

"Money was always an issue but we never let it ruin our lives. We discussed everything and when we spoke about sterilisation we thought of the positives and negatives before making our final decision together."

Roopchand earns just 5,000 rupees a month (£50) as a barber. He cannot afford

to take any time off work to care for his children. He has been relying on his aunt to look after them. He said: "I don't feel like working. I want to cry all day every day and be with my children."

"But there is no time for emotions in our life. I have to work or there's no food."

Roopchand's grief is only matched by his anger at what happened. He said: "Why didn't the doctor check the medicines? It was a simple procedure. We had no fears anything would go wrong. I'm heartbroken."

In a push to halt the growth of India's 1.26 billion population the government offers free sterilisation programmes to mothers once or twice a year - with an estimated national annual target of 20 million tubectomies. Many health workers are believed to be paid 150 rupees (£1.50) per woman they sign up.

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Tragedy: women treated after ops