What Do South Asian Women Think About Identity, Abuse and Other Intimate Issues?
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"Some immigrants from India came in 1965, mostly hotel owners. If you want more information on their immigrant experience, watch the movie Mississippi Masala." Hearing these words, Sangeeta Gupta, a history major at UCLA, was aghast. Her professor's perfunctory synopsis of the Indian immigrant experience not only marginalized the experience, but the role of women seemed altogether non-existent. Aware that other South Asian immigrants in academia hit the same wall of cultural ignorance, Sangeeta felt the need to bring research together which encompassed the wide spectrum of the South Asian immigrant experience. Sixteen months later, on October 22-23, one hundred and thirty South Asian women gathered in Los Angeles, excited about participating in the first Biennial South Asian Women's Conference (SAWC).

Curiously, despite numerous publicized requests for paper submissions, flyers posted in universities and word of mouth, I had not heard about this event until early September, 1994. The prospect of a large gathering of South Asian women sharing their work in areas of gender socialization, domestic violence, dating/marriage, media portrayal, sexuality and divorce excited me because so seldom do these topics get discussed under one roof. In a way, history was going to be made and I wanted to be there to witness it. Little did I know that this conference would be a personal journey in which I would be deciding my career and future.

Armed with my micro-recorder, camera and notebook, I boarded an early flight from Minneapolis on Friday morning. I had never been West of the Mississippi, and I had never travelled to an unfamiliar place all alone. As the plane soared over the

Grand Canyon, I was awestruck at its sheer size and beauty. I had come a long way. We all had. And then it struck me, this is what the conference was all about. We were women from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan who had for various reasons made America our home. In exchange we had to give up some of our traditions and customs and adopt new ones. We faced new and different problems by living in a society where the majority comprised white people of European origin. Firstly, we were minorities. Secondly, we were women. Thirdly, our families immigrated from different countries bringing with them a variety of languages, religions, traditions, customs, food, etc.

The confusion and contradictions regarding identity and socialization needed to be brought into the open. Were we South Asian, American, or both? Would we be able to understand and practice our religion the way our ancestors did in our homeland? Did we have to have arranged marriages while living in a liberal society like America? Living in the land of equal opportunity, did we, as women and minorities, have more choices? Maybe this weekend I would find some answers. The plane touched down in Los Angeles and I was ready, questions swirling in my mind.

Refreshed after resting for a few hours, I went to the informal mixer, held in a cozy suite on the second floor of the fancy hotel, hosted by youthful and inspiring director of the conference, Sangeeta Gupta. Amidst soft, soothing music of Ravi Shankar and home-made Indian snacks, I felt at home. There were about thirty people dressed in bright ethnic outfits and stylish Western clothes. Two women had come from Pennsylvania, one man had come from Wisconsin, a psychologist from New Mexico and the guest of honor, Shamita Das Dasgupta, from New Jersey. Each introduced themselves and shared their interests. Listening to the topics which panelists were going to present during the weekend, I was amazed. I was also amazed at the different types of academic fields the attendees (95% South Asian Hindu women) represented and were doing work in: anthropology, psychology, sociology, law, history, family studies, Asian studies, religious studies, philosophy, political science, business, and more. For many, this conference was like an adventure-leaving behind their home, family and work to focus on women and only women. One lady gleefully shared how her husband was taking care of her three daughters while she was away. Another had rescheduled her exam at college, while her friend had taken special time off from work. One way or another, we had all made it.

Next morning, I was up early and paid the $50 registration fee which covered all our meals. By nine o'clock more than a hundred people had gathered at the

chandeliered ballroom. The mood was charged. Women dressed in business suits, saris and salwar suits sat so poised, attentive with pen and paper. The conference was finally happening. Sangeeta Gupta, stood at the front of the room smiling like a proud mother with a new-born child. "This conference is about 'forging new identities,' she began. "When I decided on this as the theme name of the conference, someone told me that the word forging sounded like a difficult and painful process and suggested that I use the word creating. But I feel forging more accurately describes the process that many South Asian women have undergone. Many of us feel that we have undergone an agni pariksha, or "test by fire." And forging also brings to mind a picture of something that survives the flame-something with an inner strength which has been tested and reshaped. South Asian women not only battle the outside Western world in their search for self-identity, they continue the same battle within their home, their culture and their religion."

She shared how hard it was getting this conference to even happen. "We encountered resistance to including panels on domestic violence and divorce. One woman told us that no one in the Indian community would support our conference if we insisted on discussing domestic violence. The South Asian community continues to close its eyes, ears and heart to domestic violence."

Next the guest of honor, Mrs. Das Dasgupta spoke. She founded and runs Manavi, an Asian battered women's shelter and has helped countless Asian women put their lives back together. She stressed how necessary it was to combine down-to-earth social service activism with academic study of women's issues to achieve anything significant. I applauded her opinion because academics have always been great at analyzing problems and creating theories, but notorious for not caring if the problem they carefully dissect and diagnose ever gets solved. Many people shirk from activism and conveniently hide in the safe haven of intellectual research and theory because they are afraid of facing opposition. Our South Asian culture has to take some of the blame for this because it esteems those in academia with god-like status but has little encouragement for those who serve in unglorious positions such as volunteer abuse counselors. As a result, our communities have been slow in solving problems, especially those in which women are victimized. Then panels were presented simultaneously in two adjacent conference rooms. We could choose which one we wanted to attend and several of us couldn't resist hopskotching between the two, determined not to miss anything. The panels included: media portrayal of women, domestic violence, identity development, perspectives on divorce, forging family and gender systems in an American cultural context, sexuality and women's bodies, dating and marriage patterns of Indo-Americans, assimilation and cultural identity.

During the weekend, over fifty papers were presented. Each panelist was given 15 minutes to present her paper followed by a 15-minute lively question and answer period. At times it was overwhelming. Here is a glimpse of a few of the panels.

In the "Media Portrayal of Women" panel, Robert Rigolosi from the university of Wisconsin, Madison, examined how narration in Indian educational documentary films contributes to stereotyping Indian women. Anupama Rao, from the University of Michigan, analyzed a television series from India, based on Indian feminist writing which elaborated the effects of caste on Hindu women. One example involved the story of a brahmin girl who felt strongly about the unfairness of caste distinction and how she was subtly encouraged to cultivate a feeling of superiority over other castes.

The domestic violence panel was one of the most important. Kasturi Dasgupta, Shamita Das Dasgupta and Sujata Warrier, all involved with helping Asian battered women on the East Coast, discussed how essential it is to know that abuse is not purely physical. Many women do not realize they are in an abusive relationship because they do not consider verbal assaults or mental torture as a form of violence. Even worse is the chronic practice of South Asian women to repress anger, usually passed down and reinforced from female role models in the family. As a result, there is severe apprehension in seeking outside help.

The really interesting panel "Dating and Marriage Patterns of Indo-Americans" was based on a very revealing survey by Sangeeta Gupta and Sunjay Shah in which 130 Indo-American males and females between ages 20 and 30 answered anonymously very personal questions about interpersonal relationships-arranged marriage, pre-marital sex, dating, divorce, etc. (See side-bar for details.)

The panel that attracted the most attention, and attendance, was "Sexuality and Women's Bodies." Rinita Mazumdar, a logician from Massachusetts used Western thinkers and the writings of legendary Hindu lawgiver, Manu, to expose "marital rape." She emphasized how sex when it is not consensual between married couples is justified among South Asians because it has been sanctioned by religious and philosophical texts. A verse in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad reads: "If she does not grant him his desire, he should beat her with a stick or his hand and overcome her saying with manly power and glory, 'I take away your glory.'(VI.4.7) Also the imbedded Asian idea that a wife is her husband's possession, not his

partner, further makes a husband feel justified in forcing his wife to comply to his any demand. Rinita emphasized that the acceptance of nonconsensual sex is just one more example of a practice that continues because women have been taught to be silent, especially if the abuser is a family member.

Next, Shamita Das Dasgupta spoke engagingly on the challenges of communication between mothers and daughters, inparticularly regarding sex matters. She confided that she could more easily give explicit sex advice to her daughter's friends than with her own daughter, Sayantani, who is studying medicine at Johns Hopkins University and who co-authored the paper presented by her mother. This communication gap is a problem which almost every South Asian mother can identify with.

Mrs. Das Gupta also shared how even in traditional religious communities, women in India manage to communicate about sexual matters and even joke about them openly, especially during preparations for a wedding, where the sexual element is very subtle, yet very much present.

Dr. kasaulya Hart, from the South Asian Studies department of UC Berkeley, explained that the rakshasis in Kamban's Ramayana were portrayed as real women, without any positive or negative connotations. She questioned why these rakshasis were always popularly interpreted as demonic.

Although most of the panelists were Indian Hindus, there were nine non-Indians who presented papers and moderated as well. One Hindu participant told me at lunch how outraged she was by one of the non-Indian moderator's condescending tone, concluding, "I don't think white people should be allowed to attend this conference." She felt Western people, especially academics, too often introduce an arrogance and skewed perceptions of a culture not theirs. Though her assessment of the moderator was, unfortunately, fair, she is totally alone wanting to make the event a "for-Indians-only" affair.

Apart from the panels, there was an excellent book fair with a superb selection of books on women's issues and a fun and stimulating film festival Saturday night. Though this event was cerebral stimulation, it is worth noting our palates were totally spoiled for two days with the finest Indian vegetarian dishes, exquisitely

prepared by the hotel's executive chef, an Indian. Even now, I can still taste that delectable mint yogurt.

In net, the conference was a huge success. Firstly, it gave us all the opportunity to articulate women's concerns only vaguely defined in the past. Issues normally considered too taboo such as wife abuse and sexuality were aired intelligently and healthily. Secondly, this conference helped me see that the "assimilation," experience doesn't automatically mean a painful tussle between Indian and American cultures. In essence, we don't need to trade our sarees for blue jeans or vice versa. Thirdly, this conference is a statement that women will not stand being marginalized, be it by Western society or by our own South Asian society. We want to be acknowledged and valued as contributors-whether as wives, mothers and homemakers or as career women or as both.

On a personal level, this gathering of bright, caring minds catalyzed a decision to pursue my master's degree in Indian literature focusing on the portrayal of women in Indian literature, past and present. And though few families attended, more should have. I wish I could make forums like these mandatory for all immigrant families. Open communication is still the greatest need of the day.

A book with the major presentations will be published. For a copy or for more information write: Sangeeta Gupta, SAWC, 885 Levering Ave., #505, Los Angeles, CA 90024. The next conference is scheduled for September, 1996.

"Tell-All" Youth Survey

- Surprisingly, 80% of Indo-American youth, ages 21-30, said they are willing to meet a prospective marriage partner selected by their parents if the person shares similar interests. But, girls want a minimum 15 month (boys 6 months) get-to-know-them period before deciding.

- Both men and women chose kindness as the best quality trait-more valued than 16 others including good looks, intelligence, education.

25-30% said they are "sexually active." Their partners are both Indian and

non-Indian, about 50/50. (Comparatively, nationwide studies reveal 70-80% of non-Indian American youth are sexually active.)

- 26% women and 40% men are open to marrying a non-Indian.

- 94% men and 90% women said divorce is "an option to an unhappy marriage." 45% of the women and 70% of the men said "mutual incompatibility" was sufficient reason for divorce. 45% of the women and 42% of the men cited refusal to have children as ground for divorce.

- Most of the men said intelligence was "very important" in a girl they date but only "somewhat important" for the person they marry.

- The women nearly unanimously expect their husbands to share household responsibilities such as cooking. The majority of the men agree.

*(Excerpts from a 1994 survey conducted by SAWC director Sangeeta Gupta and Sanjay Shah. 130 youth were questioned anonymously.)