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SOCIAL ISSUES

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Hindus in America Tackle A Secret Shame

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Just four words can too often sum up the life of an Indian woman. "Kallaanalum kanavan pullaanalum purushan." This Tamil proverb roughly translates to "Even if he is a stone, he is your husband, even if he is a weed, he is still your spouse." From the time a girl is young, familial pressure, religious texts and ceremonies, even popular fiction and Bollywood films, reinforce this idea of male superiority. From the custody of father and brothers, a girl child traditionally passes to the custody of her husband. Unfortunately, too many men believe they have the right to physically abuse their wives, much the same as they beat their children for every supposed wrong. The abuse is deplorable in Hindu homes, and it has come full force along with the immigrants to America whose situation this article explores. Be assured that the problem of spouse abuse transcends racial, religious and national borders. No faith group is exempt from its horrors. But we Hindus, advocates of nonviolence, should be taking a special lead in solving this problem in our own homes.When young couples cross the oceans to a new continent, along with their bottles of

pickles and family albums, a lot of other invisible baggage creeps into their suitcases--very Indian notions of what makes a marriage, the role of a husband and the duties of an ideal wife. Traditional mores decree that women don't work outside the home or drive or talk back; men don't wash clothes or change diapers or go to PTA meetings at school. Men work in the larger world and women at home, making their husbands' lives comfortable. A good woman doesn't complain, and a good man is always the breadwinner, shouldering the burdens. When these ideas hit American soil, there are some minor tremors, if not major shake-ups in these marriages.

After all, this is the land of "I, me, myself," of searching for one's inner child, of apostles like Oprah and Geraldo who herald everything from sexual mores to marriage breakdowns from their pulpits. It is also a land, though imperfect, where idealists are always striving for fairness and equality, be it in gender, class or race issues, and where there are enough soapboxes and forums to speak from. While in India everything one does or doesn't do reflects back on the good family name, here a man and a woman are adrift in a sea of indifference. Nobody cares which village or caste you are from; nor will your individual actions tarnish the reputation of a whole generation. Living in America, one is suddenly freed to question the rules that were written in stone back home.

While many women suffer abuse silently in India [see page 48 for Madhu Kishwar's article on the changes in India], there are more opportunities to speak up in America. Yet years of social conditioning make it difficult for South Asian women to open up to the larger world. According to US Census Bureau statistics, fewer than three percent of Indian marriages end up

in divorce, against a national average of almost 50 percent. But do these remarkable figures camouflage an uglier reality? How many of these women are trapped in unhappy or dangerous marriages they are too afraid to abandon? Does the low divorce rate mean successful marriages--or suffocating marriages? And this is not to imply that divorce is any solution to the complex problem of domestic violence. Seventy-three percent of all American women injured by a spouse are injured after they separate from him. Others proceed into another abusive relationship.

Domestic abuse may vary from disparaging talk to a withdrawal of funds to pushing and punching to actual assault that may land the victim in the emergency ward. Abuse also includes restricting a woman's phone calls or not allowing her to go out [see www2.stimo.com/alive/html/abuse.htm for a comprehensive list]. The provocation can be anything--lack of dowry or even a working wife who knows her place in the world. Sometimes it can be rage over a pair of unmatched socks. And sometimes it can be over nothing: no matter what the woman does, she does it wrong. Among Americans of all races and religions, battering is the single greatest cause of injury to women, more than car accidents, rapes and muggings combined. Fully one-quarter of the reported violent crime in America is wife assault.

Observes Shamita Das Dasgupta, co-founder of Manavi, the oldest advocacy group for South Asian women: "Women just have so many pressures on them. They are working outside and

achieving and also coming home and still carrying the main responsibility of running a household and taking care of the children. Sometimes when women are growing and moving in different ways, men feel very upset about it. They feel threatened or they feel that their life expectations are not being met." There are abusive situations, she said, where men expect total obedience from their wives, but the women are not willing to do that because they don't see that as part of their lives anymore.

Author and women's activist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni of Houston, Texas, points out that Indian women are regarded as second-class citizens whose life isn't worth as much as a man's. She also gets the burden of making the marriage work. If it doesn't, it's her fault. Absent is the principal that both husband and wife need to make the marriage work.

Solutions are difficult because the problem is so hidden, so taboo. Dasgupta said, "South Asian women tend to discuss their emotional problems with other women or with someone they really

trust, because every honor is an honor for the whole family, and a dishonor is a dishonor to the whole family. People are very reluctant to come out in the open."

As the Indian-American population has become more diverse in the US, the picture has become more complicated, with the struggles and problems of the newer, less-skilled immigrants who have come in the '80s. These struggling newcomers have lowered the mean income of the Indian community and are certainly prone to the problems that go hand-in-hand with culture shock, unemployment or financial crisis. But interviews showed that having a fat bank balance or an Ivy League education is no insurance against domestic disharmony.

Indeed, the shocker is that highly educated women are so susceptible to these problems. Dasgupta recalls an affluent woman physician who came in during the early days of Manavi with bruises and a black eye. This woman, with a string of letters behind her name and a prestigious practice, was not even allowed to sign her own

checkbook by her abusive husband!

From just one organization against domestic violence in the South Asian community in the '80s, there are now dozens of organizations scattered across the US. The need certainly seems to be out there, for the tales the files of these agencies tell are horrific. As the Indian community has spread over the US, the number of advocacy organizations has also increased. For immigrant women who have been torn apart from nurturing extended families in the sub-continent, these groups offer support and encouragement. They've set up shelters and all of them handle crisis intervention, advocacy, culture-specific counseling and legal clinics. They offer advocates who speak Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and Gujarati and serve as interpreters in court.

Manavi, which means "primal woman" in Sanskrit, was founded 14 years ago. It is the oldest of these organizations. It started with just six members and has now grown to 150. Based in New Jersey, it brings together first and second generation women in its dedicated volunteer base which

works to increase awareness of women's legal and social rights, and help gain women autonomy and self-reliance. It publishes a newsletter and offers outreach and education for the community. Funds are raised through community events and grants.

In 1997, Manavi established a home for women in crisis, Ashiana (which means "nest"), and this provides shelter for displaced women and their children for a maximum period of 18 months. Ashiana is a culturally familiar and yet safe harbor to women as they learn to fend for themselves by learning English and finding jobs and permanent housing. Manavi has also established a project called Zamin to assist battered women who are seeking permanent residency in the United States, for many abusive men hold the threat of deportation over their victimized wives.

Another prominent group is Sakhi, which means "woman friend" in several South Asian languages, and is based in New York. This year it completed ten years and has served over 2,000 women. Prema Vohra of Sakhi says that in any given month Sakhi receives 15 to 25 new calls from

battered South Asian women. And those are just the ones who actually muster up the courage to pick up the phone! "Is it Your Business if Your Neighbor Beats His Wife? You bet her life it is!" reads a placard designed by Sakhi.

Vohra tells of one young college student who turned to Sakhi in her hour of need. She was involved with an abusive boy friend who would hit her for the flimsiest reasons--like putting a backpack on the bed. When she decided to fight back, she found that for "every one hit, I would be hit twice, for every kick, I would get kicked twice." When she found out she was pregnant, it was a real crisis in the family. She recalls, "I was petrified of telling my family. His family, upon hearing about the pregnancy, accused me of wrongdoing and denied their son's actions. One side of my own family found me to be 'ruining' the family name, and they are no longer in contact with me."

Sri Renganathan of Sawera, an advocacy group based in Portland, Oregon, says about one in ten Indian women in America is abused, and that class

and wealth are no guarantee of safety. She finds that many of Sawera's clients are educated women from well-to-do families, many with their own businesses and making over US$100,000. Sawera helped put two batterers in jail. Renganathan told of one case involving a highly trained professional woman who had been abused at home due to her lack of a dowry. In spite of their counseling and support, she still went back to her abuser. Renganathan puts it down to 5,000 years of conditioning, a culturally imposed perception of women's roles. Many women blame themselves and think things will work out if only they try harder. They attempt to make a go of it for the sake of the children, and to stay within the bounds of society.

Nav Nirmaan is a Queens-based organization dealing with alcohol and substance abuse in the South Asian community. It was founded in 1991 by Anand Walter Picardo, who himself was a recovered alcoholic and realized the need for such an organization.

Many of Nav Nirmaan's clients are construction laborers, cab and limo drivers and workers in stores. About 80 percent of these clients have completed the South Asian equivalent of grade seven, few have a high school education, and very, very few have a college degree. The common pattern is for the male, who usually worked on a farm or drove a truck back home, to come first to America without his family. He shares an apartment with three or four other single males, and that goes on for three or four years. All the while, he is living in an ethnic cocoon, reading only ethnic newspapers, watching ethnic television, and basically isolating himself from mainstream US. Since his only contact with the larger world is through his work, he isn't able to find out how the system really works. These men tend to fall into gambling and alcohol abuse.

After four to ten years, the new immigrant generally brings his wife to the US, and he sees absolutely no reason for her to go out and learn the language or learn a work skill. Her contact with the outside world is primarily through the gurudwara, mosque or temple. If abuse isn't present already, problems may arise after the children get into the school system and the family has to juggle two cultures.

Male dominance and family prestige are such important factors in South Asian cultures that women often choose to stay in abusive marriages just to save the family name and not ruin the marriage prospects of their siblings. Leaving a bad marriage is also difficult because Asian society does not look compassionately at single mothers or divorcees.

"Historically even in South Asia, the family has always been touted as being perfect," observes Sujata Warrier, president of the board of Manavi. "It has been believed that joint families work well and the structure is well-maintained because there is a hierarchy, people take responsibility and there is family accounting. But that has never even been historically true. There is no such thing as a perfect family." As she points out, this myth has masked problems within the family--problems of violence against women encompassing everything from murder to infant mortality in South Asia.

Hindu scripture advocates proper treatment of women. For example, the ancient law text, Manu Dharma Shastra, states, "In houses where women are honored and respected, the Gods dwell

there. Where the women are not respected and honored, whatever one does is futile." But if the woman's family won't help her, then who will? Our temple managers and priests seem to be oblivious of these issues. Asked about domestic abuse within the community, Pandit Krishna Pratap, the head priest of The Hindu Center in Flushing, New York, seemed taken aback. "Nobody has ever approached us about such matters. Occasionally they tell us about a husband's alcoholism or other difficulties--but never about beatings," said Pratap. "People like to keep things private. And of course, these things happen in marriages. If they would consult us, we would advise them because Hinduism accords a very high place to women." Temple priests and managers should take any intimation of domestic violence seriously, and know where to direct a woman facing abuse to

get help locally. Similarly, other community organizations, language associations, student groups, etc., need to educate themselves on this serious problem.

Divakaruni warned that untrained people may give inappropriate advice for a violent situation, such as, "Be patient and dutiful like Sita," or, "Stay in the abusive home for the sake of the children." She advises, "If temple priests or others connected to the temples are to counsel effectively, they must undergo domestic violence training, just as we have." And the same advice would apply to anyone wanting to make a difference in domestic abuse. Sujata concluded, "We have to realize that these are our problems--hiding them is not going to make them go away. Only when we take

ownership of the issues can things change."

THERE ARE MANY RESOURCES ON THE INTERNET. START WITH www.UMIACS.UMD.EDU/USERS/SAWWEB/SAWNET/VIOLENCE.HTML FOR RESOURCES BOTH IN AMERICA AND INDIA. OTHER GENERAL SITES ARE: www.BWSS.ORG/; www.TELALINK.NET/~POLICE/ABUSE/. PHOTOGRAPHS WERE TAKEN BY ROHINI KUMAR AND STAGED WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE MALAYSIAN DEVOTEES OF HINDUISM TODAY PUBLISHER SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIYASWAMI.