

# ARTS & SOCIETY



Clockwise from top: the wedding in India; Manjushree at the court; mini-South Asia in New York's Jackson Heights.

## W O M E N

# Brave — and Battered

### Abuse turns South Asian women's new lives upside down in U.S.

By Lee Adair Lawrence

**M**anjushree Sengupta prayed for a happy life when her plane touched down in the United States. A year after her arranged marriage to an Indian-born accountant, the 35-year-old left her home in India to rejoin her husband and his parents.

But she wondered why he hadn't been in touch with her in the months she waited for her paperwork to be processed. And her new family's welcome made her wary: "They took away all my jewellery," Manjushree claims, "saying, 'we'll put it in the bank and give it to you later.'" They still have it.

She would lose much more in the weeks and months that followed: her privacy and self-confidence. Worse, her husband began to beat her. When he kicked her in the stomach, she feared she might lose the baby she was carrying. That prompted Manjushree to flee, seeking refuge in a strange, new land.

Manjushree's is not an isolated case. Thousands of South Asian women emigrate to the land of opportunity with their husbands each year. And many see their dreams of a new life dissolve into nightmares when spouses turn on them in a rage of abuse. While it's a crisis for any woman, this group's unique circumstances make it even more difficult to seek help. Most speak English, but they aren't familiar with American usage, creating misunderstandings; they've left their friends and family half a planet away; they don't know U.S. laws; and they may depend on their husbands for financial support — and the right to live in the U.S.

In response to the problem, more than a dozen support groups for South Asian women living in the U.S. have sprung up in the last decade. They include Manavi in New Jersey, Sakhi in New York, Asha in Washington, D.C., Maitri in California, Sneha in Connecticut, Bodhini in Texas and Apna Ghar in Chicago. Their hot-lines ring with increasing frequency. In 1993,

Manavi added 200 cases to its workload, and Asha reported a 400% increase in calls this year over 1993.

These groups, which know South Asia's culture, provide what ordinary support groups cannot: an understanding of the emotional and cultural complexities of the battered woman. They also understand the American legal system and can help victims seek the protection it promises.

For Manjushree, as for most battered women, the abuse comes as a surprise. She spent 10 days with her new husband in India and a month with her in-laws at their home in Calcutta. But they gave no warning signs of the abuse that awaited her in the U.S., where the family moved.

Within weeks of her arrival, in March 1993, the family began to strip away her privacy. "My letters used to be opened," Manjushree says. "I was not supposed to contact anyone, and if my parents called, they would make me switch on the speaker-phone so that they could hear everything that was said." They forbade her to

close her bedroom door, even when resting or undressing.

Then they began to accuse her of bearing a financial burden. Manjushree, who had held a research post in a prestigious Indian academic institution, took a job at a day-care centre. They checked her pay stub to see how many hours she had worked. And they pocketed her earnings.

Like many South Asian victims, Manjushree was too frightened and intimidated to ask anyone for help. Her husband told her that she needed him for her permanent resident status and work permit. Her objections only triggered abuse. "If I ever said anything, my husband started beating me," she adds. "My mother-in-law would purposely touch me with hot kitchen utensils."

Three times, her husband beat her so badly that Manjushree needed medical treatment. Because the idea of contacting a counsellor or the police was anathema to her, she silently endured the abuse for 10 months. When her doctor pressed her to explain her injuries, she finally told all — that her husband had yanked her fingers back, kicked her in the neck and twisted her arm. But she swore him to secrecy, fearing even more brutal beatings if her husband found out she had told. And like many victims, she blamed herself for his outbursts. Says Manjushree: "I came to believe that if only I were a bit more beautiful, he would like me."

But on January 7, 1994, Manjushree had enough. Three months pregnant, her husband threw her to the floor and kicked her in the stomach. Fearing for her unborn child's safety, she gathered her passport and papers, and fled to a shelter. Then she called Asha.

"By the time people are willing to come to us," says Asha volunteer Ranu Basu, an attorney practising family law in Washington, D.C., "they have endured a lot." Typically, they've been locked into a cycle of shame and terror — they feel they have failed as a wife and daughter, that anything they do might hurt their younger siblings' chances for a good marriage, and that they could never make it on their own in this unfamiliar culture.

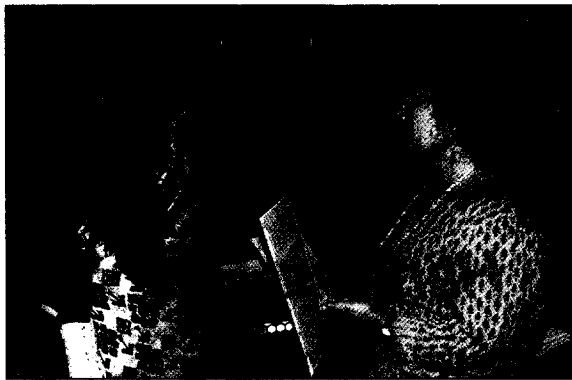
Not all their fears are unfounded. Many South Asian women were brought up to be dependent on their husbands, especially in the area of household finances. "It is almost a virtue in South Asian society," Asha's Basu says, "for a woman to be seen as unconcerned and unfamiliar with such worldly issues as bank accounts and finances." Alone in a strange country, she has no financial savvy. Worse, she lacks a credit history, which she needs to rent an apartment.

Abused women often flee on impulse,

as Manjushree did. But even escape holds dire consequences for new immigrants. Without documents or money, a woman runs the risk of being deported.

Manjushree had not been married long enough to qualify for her own residency permit. When she left her husband, U.S. immigration officials wanted proof that she had married in good faith — not just to obtain entry to the U.S. Her medical reports substantiated her allegations; without them, she might have been deported. That's why support groups urge callers to document their abuse with snapshots and eye-witness accounts.

Manjushree has now tapped into a network of support systems through churches and pregnancy centres. "There is a fear among Hindu ladies," says Manjushree, "that they cannot go to churches, or that if they do, the churches will try to convert them and not help." But they have been a godsend. Case workers at a Catholic church in Maryland are helping Manjushree to find employment and housing. They assist her in filling out myriad government forms. And they introduced her to a woman who accompanied Manjushree to her Lamaze prenatal



Ranu Basu with Asha supporter Pushpa Schwartz.

classes, to be by her side when she delivered her baby.

The South Asian community itself has been slow to acknowledge the impact of domestic violence — or to do anything to help victims pick up the pieces after their lives fall apart. The minister in charge of information and communication at the Bangladeshi Embassy in Washington, G. H. Khan, blames family violence on the U.S.'s materialistic culture and lack of strong family support. And he says its incidence in the Bangladeshi community "is negligible."

Social workers disagree. They estimate the incidence among South Asians to be at least as high as that in the general U.S. population. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, four million women — about 4% of women over 18 years of age — officially report violent abuse each year. But researchers suggest that domestic violence is chronically

under-reported. And South Asian activists note that wife battering is more easily concealed among their people.

Veena Kapur, an Indian psychologist with a private practice in Maryland, rejects the thesis that violence erupts because a family has been transplanted. It's true, she says, that South Asian men who come to the U.S. face unprecedented pressures: They are bereft of a support system; they often lose the privileged social status they enjoyed at home; they are obvious foreigners; and they may worry that their wives might find American men more attractive. "But this in itself does not make men abusers," she maintains. "At most, the stresses put pressure on existing fault lines."

South Asian community organisations see women's groups as feminist organisations bent on destroying traditional family values. Yet South Asian activists maintain that their goal is to stop abuse, not promote divorce. The groups' efforts are slowly paying off. "There is a feeling now that we have to do something," says Suresh Chandra, president of the Virginia-based India Cultural Coordination Committee. "We are morally in support of groups like Asha, but we have done nothing practical as yet."

Asha's Basu, who gives free counsel to 14 clients, hopes to rally fellow South Asian lawyers and professionals to offer their assistance. "How many more women are enduring what should not be endured," she says, "is anybody's guess."

Manjushree is now trying to put her past behind her. On June 2, Ranjit K. Sengupta appeared in a Maryland court to answer three charges of battery. The judge handed down "probation before judgment": Sengupta will pay a fine, seek counselling — and not harass Manjushree over 18 months of supervised probation. If he violates the conditions, he could face up to five years in prison.

On July 4, Manjushree gave birth to a healthy boy weighing just under six pounds. She considered returning to India, where she could live with her parents. But, she concludes: "People would talk. They would wonder what I did wrong. And even children would tease my son." Instead, she is looking for a job and a place to live in the U.S., where single mothers are not so unusual.

Her battles aren't over, yet. Manjushree is filing for divorce — and trying to recover the jewels her mother-in-law took into "safekeeping." And she is pushing for a paternity test, to scotch rumours in the South Asian community that the child she bore is not her husband's. ■

Lee Adair Lawrence is a writer based in Washington D.C.