Taking Care of One's Own

A Conversation with Shamita Das Dasgupta

❍Paige Passano

THE South Asian community in the United States currently makes up approximately 1.3 percent of the population, concentrated mostly on the East and West coasts — with a majority of South Asians living in California, New York, New Jersey, and in the Philadelphia area. New Jersey-based Manavi was the first organisation in the USA created with the aim of addressing problems particular to South Asian women, both within and outside of their community. Most of Manavi s work involves helping women who are encountering some type of violence in their lives. In an average year, Manavi gets 150-200 new cases, and usually works with each individual for six to twelve months. Women are providedwith counselling, interest-free loans, legal information and referrals, interpreter services, education on domestic violence, and assistance in job placement and housing.

Manavi was founded in 1985 by six women immigrants, including Shamita Das Dasgupta, out of whose home the group was based for the first four years. In late 1989, Manavi acquired a one room office, and now has two young women working as the first paid part-time employees, in addition to 20-25 male and female volunteers, mainly of Indian and Bangladeshi origin. The counselling group is made up of six women, trained not only in the 40-60 hour training required for state certification, but also in particular issues relating to South Asian women and immigrants.

What sparked off the idea to start Manavi?

I had been in the US since 1968, and from 1972-73 I had been quite involved with the mainstream women's movement, and a few of the other women had also worked within the movement, a little bit here and there, but by 1980-81, I was completely disgusted. I felt that there was no place for Indian women and that our issues were not being addressed within the movement. I had actually worked myself up quite a bit in the hierarchy of the National Organisation for Women (NOW), but no matter how many times we spoke about immigrant issues, or women of colour issues, when it came down to work, it was always "our work" and "you need to fit in here."

What ended up happening, totally accidently, was that I met a couple of other Indian women who also felt that we had a need to have something of our own. Six of us got together and started to work on consciousness raising on immigrant issues within the Asian community. So that's how we founded Manavi. Our focus on violence against women was quite accidental, as we started off much more academically oriented, we didn't know where we were going. The moment we started Manavi, women started to call us and say, "Look, I'm in this kind of trouble and you are an Indian organisation and you need to help me." And so we kind of left our academic approach and decided to become very pragmatic. That was what seemed to be needed.

Shamita Das Dasgupta

Give me some examples of what you encountered that led you to become disgusted with the mainstream women's movement in the US.

There is so much talk lately of the problem of groups splintering off, especially women of colour, breaking down the force of the movement. But we are just saying we have some special concerns, so if you want us to

work with you, why aren't we considered equal partners? If we are just asked to come in and show our faces, because we have different coloured faces, that is simply a waste of our time.

If you look at the feminist movement in the United States you can see the issues that they have picked up: mainly reproductive rights and equal pay. Both of which are definitely important issues, but immigrant women from all different backgrounds are also concerned with the important issues of alienation, education, women coming in to the US and not knowing any skills, having a different value system. For example, we share a concern in ending violence against women but the way we react against this violence is not the same as with American women. Even now, after so long, when we go to a conference to talk about issues of domestic violence, we are continually confronted with the glib and quick answer that all you have to do is get a restraining order (a court order that forbids a particular person from coming within a certain distance from someone who claims that person has abused, harassed or threatened them) and leave the guy. But this may not be as easily accepted within our community. While it is a very viable option for some, plenty of women do not want the father of their children taken away by the police. They don't want the police in their homes. They will sometimes say, "Of course I want him to change but I just don't want to leave him."

One also gets sick of this image that so many white women have of us that we are so subservient, we don't speak out, we are too under the thumb of our men, those kinds of things. Whenever South Asian women end up at the shelters, most of them won't stay there. They always get the same questions: "Was your marriage arranged?" "How could you accept that?" "I would never accept that!" It just adds up to derision: aren't you this poor, backward woman. That's another thing that we really don't need to put up with.

"Some feminists are extremely shocked that I'm married, and quite happily so, and the next thing they're shocked by is that I've been married to the same man for 30 years....Their jaws drop at this point. 'To the same man?' is always the next question."

Once I was called into a shelter where there was a badly beaten woman who had been brought there from a hospital three days before. She hadn't eaten since she got there, for three whole days, except for some yogurt. Nobody knew what was going on since she didn't speak much English and she was just remaining very quiet. They were quite distressed and feeling very uncomfortable and they asked me to come in. I found the woman, who was roughly 50 years old, walking around like a ghost, wearing a long nightgown. I sat down to talk to her and she was so relieved to talk to someone who understood her. They had given her clothing — pants and a shirt, but she wouldn't wear those things. I finally found out that she wasn't used to wearing pants. She needed something like a sari to cover herself and this nightgown was the closest she couid get to that. She wasn't eating because she was a vegetarian, and when I told them that, they said, "But there are plenty of vegetables for her to eat here!" The problem was that she couldn't use the vessels that they had, because meatwas being cooked in them. So she was living on yogurt. People assumed that if she needed something special, like a pot, she would just ask, but in her eyes she was a guest there and she felt that she was in no position to demand anything. She figured that, as a guest, she would just make do with whatever was given to her. It wasn't her way to come out and say, "I want a pot, I want this, I want that..." People forget this, they expect everyone to act in the same way. So one of the things Manavi does is to go out and train shelter workers continuously, on this whole issue of "cultural diversity" — you can't expect everybody to know everything, but sometimes they just don't think to even ask if a woman needs something in particular.

There is also the implicit suggestion that all South Asian women are learning feminism from Americans. You have to remind them about our history, who we are, that we have a rich history of resistance... It keeps happening over and over again, and I'm not talking about lay people, I'm talking about women within the movement against domestic violence. One of the things that I've encountered quite often is that some feminists are extremely shocked that I'm married, and quite happily so, and the next thing they're shocked by is that I've been married to the sanie man for 30 years, since I got married at 16. Their jaws drop at this point. "To the same man?" is always the next question. This amazes them, the fact that we've made it together, and that he's very supportive, very much involved. I consider him a very close friend, a compatriot, comrade.

I've even been told once, in a NOW meeting where I was speaking, that now that I'm living in America, I should change my style of dressing, because a sari is seen as backward and subservient.

How did you respond to that?

How *do* you respond to something like that? I mean, I'm not there to yell back at someone. So my question was, "Why do you think that? What makes you think that the way I choose to dress is any worse than your own clothes? How do clothes symbolise freedom or subservience?" And, of course, a lot of people there were embarrassed and hushed the whole thing up, but this was not something totally unique. This is a common American reaction to Indian women, and this woman probably just articulated it. There are so many little things that you encounter, like people making a fuss over you because you look exotic to them. But when you bring up immigrant issues like Proposition 187, so many don't know a thing about it. Proposition 187 was passed in California as a way of limiting rights of undocumented people and their children even if they were US born. It is extremely important for us because many of the battered women who either leave home or are turned out have no financial resources, and they have to rely on public assistance. If many states adopt Proposition 187, as seems to be the case, (New York, New Jersey, Texas, and Florida have shown interest), battered women from immigrant communities will have no way of fighting for justice. They will be completely penniless and immediately deportable. To make matters worse, a new bill in tune with 187 is already in the House: the Family Self-Sufficiency Act (S-269). It is part of the welfare reform package. This bill will deny critical public assistance to legal, permanent residents and naturalised citizens, and would have a particularly adverse affect on battered women and their children. The idea is that the family must take care of itself, which puts battered women in an extremely vulnerable position. How can the family take care of itself if the cruelty being inflicted is within the family? Manavi has launched a campaign by sending messages to senators in order to stop this bill and exempt cases where battered women are concerned.

Manavi members at a New Jersey rally

When I had to explain this Proposition to one particular American woman, she was shocked and totally disgusted, but then she said, "You know, this is one of the reasons I don't even want to know what's happening in politics — it's so awful — I don't even want to hear it." Which is wonderful for her because she can afford to do it, but none of us can. None of us can afford *not* to know about it, She can very glibly say that what's happening in Washington DC is so awful, so retrograde, that she doesn't want to hear it, because it doesn't touch her life, but it touches ours. You don't hear about mainstream feminist movements speaking up on Proposition 187, and why not? Because it doesn't effect their lives. It touches ours. So we're screaming about it.

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What is the range in economic status in the South Asian community?

If you look at the history of South Asian immigration to the US, you will see there has been a tremendous amount of racism leveled against all types of South Asians. The first group of immigrants who migrated in the 1800s were mainly Punjabi men who settled down in California. They faced a very hostile environment and because of the miscegenation policies at that time, they could neither marry local women nor bring Punjabi women into the country. At that time, most of Asia, including India, was in the barred zone, which meant that immigrants from these countries were not welcome in the US. Many of this first group remained Sikhs but also intermarried with the local Mexican community. But because of these extremely racist immigrant policies, this community completely dwindled down. Some got repatriated to India and some even had their citizenship revoked. There was a law passed that Indians and some other Asian groups could not own land, so families who had been farming for a long time lost their land, or they had to

lease their land from white owners, who would wait until the crop was ready to be harvested and then confiscate the yield. There are plenty of case studies of farmers who were starved out when their crop was forcibly taken away from them. So the immigration of Indians almost stopped beginning in the early 1900s to about the 1960s. Then when the Immigration and Naturalisation Act passed in 1965, the second wave of South Asian immigrants started to come from all over. But the immigration policies were very clearly biased towards highly educated individuals in the technical fields. So, initially, the settlement was a very homogenous group of highly skilled experts who were very technically oriented. It was mainly men at first, and then the women followed. That's the population that grew up. This group, because of their education and technical skills, became very financially successful relatively quickly. After getting settled, this population began to sponsor their relatives to come to the US helped by the Family Reunification Act. That's when you can see a slight shift in demographics.

The majority of immigrants living in the States today started coming after 1970, and more than 70 percent of South Asian women have entered after that date. This second group were people who weren't quite as highly educated. They were business oriented rather than having a technical education. So what we have now is a bipolar distribution — the first group being very highly educated professionals who have been highly successful, and the second group are the people who have their own businesses, own news-stands and other, more ethnic, businesses. The second group has also been successful but they are not in the same socio-economic echelon. The division is apparent now, especially socially, within the community. There is a definite chasm between the two groups.

How do you finance Manavi's work?

Ninety percent of our funding comes from membership and donations from the Indian community. Manavi is a membership driven organisation, we have 150-160 members who pay $15 annually to help support us, so that is a big financial source for us. They are not active, but sometimes will give money, or some just want to be members and receive our quarterly newsletter. This goes out to members and informs them about what has been happening in the past three months, along with articles and our collected statistics of three or four months.

We also do a serious campaign involving lots of corporations, where we ask South Asians who are in the corporate world to donate their United Way funds to Manavi. They can now

Anuradha's Story*

Anuradha was working in India when she got married to a very highly educated non-resident Indian. After joining him in the US, she soon discovered that he wanted her to do everything at his bidding. Despite a real effort on her part to please him, she found him impossible to satisfy. He made unreasonable demands on her such as forcing her to get up at five in the morning and do particular jobs for him. Then he started restricting her food, including what and when she would eat. She was used to eating rice, vegetables, and fish, but he decided that she couldn't eat any of these things anymore. She was only allowed to eat yogurt during the day, and bread and boiled vegetables at night. He was a professor, but since it was summertime he was home to supervise and make sure she followed his orders. Then he started restricting the amount of food she would eat, keeping her continuously hungry. Soon the restrictions extended to controlling her movements. He wouldn't let her leave the apartment, she couldn't talk to anybody, she couldn't even draw open her curtains. She didn't know why he was restricting her food, except for his claim: "People get fat here, and if you don't do this, you're going to gain weight." In the beginning, she was not ready to leave her husband at all, nor did Manavi present this as the only solution, but the problems escalated. Pretty soon if she did anything that he didn't approve of, even eating a potato chip, he would kick her out of the house in the day, or even in the middle of the night, and he would lock her out. One night the police saw her standing outside and asked her what was the matter, and when she told them, the policemen made her husband open the door. This only made it worse for her, as her husband's anger escalated. He withdrew all affection from her and routinely kicked her out of the bedroom and ordered her to sleep elsewhere. She ended up getting kicked out of the house so often that she finally called the police, which stopped him for a while, until he changed jobs, relocated, and started the whole pattern up again. Anuradha received counselling and legal help from Manavi for over a year, and even kept in contact when she moved out of state. She finally decided that she could not continue with the relationship and divorced him, after seeking help from Manavi in finding a lawyer. She is now back in India and has received some monetary settlement from her ex-husband.

**Not her real name*

specify where these funds go. The other 10 percent comes from small grants from organisations, but we try to only take grants from groups that won't dictate to us, tell us that you have to serve a certain number of women or something. A lot of these foundations will say you have to be *only* working on domestic violence. If they have an agenda of their own, we don't accept the money. We won't change our focus to get funds. This means that on a day-to-day basis, we are so restricted by lack of funds and resources that it takes us a long time to get things done.

Do you have to turn down a lot of potential funding due to these restrictions?

Some, yes, but we have received funding from places like the Chicago Resource Center, the Ms Foundation, AT&T, the New Jersey Foundation — who have looked at our work and said: "Fine, we like what you are doing."

What kind of expenses does Manavi have?

We try to keep it so minimal. Our two employees are probably our main expense, and we have a small room, costs of newsletter printing, things like that. That's about it. We do also give interest-free loans to women, and if they return those, that's great. We advance up to $1,000, or sometimes up to $ 1,500. A lot of women haven't returned the loans, but we can do nothing about it.

Do you ever get so tight on money that you have to stop offering these loans?

Up to now it hasn't happened, because we're really careful about our expenses. Many of us give our time and our money freely, in the sense that if we have to mail something, we might do it from our pocket. It has worked out OK. Of course it would be wonderful to have a lot more money so that we could do even more work, but it's just not worth taking funds from groups that dictate terms.

Manavi members at a meeting

Do the Indian women who come to Manavi tend to be from certain parts of the subcontinent? And what about second generation South Asian women?

Women who come to us are a real cross regional and linguistic mix — both first generation and second generation immigrants. With the second generation, there is a little more awareness of the laws and rules and a little more assertiveness. They are able to come to a conclusion faster, and they are more clear about where they are going with their lives, and what they want out of a situation.

In terms of regions, the vast majority of women we serve are Indian (95 percent), but we do work with some Pakistanis (one percent) and Bangladeshis (four percent). We have worked with a handful of Afghan and Egyptian women, two Sri Lankans, and no Nepalis. It partially depends on who is on Manavi's counselling list, what languages they speak. We do get a lot of Bengali women because three of us speak Bengali. There are many Punjabis, and a lot of Gujarati women since we also have Gujarati volunteers. Sometimes a woman will just call and say that she needs a person who speaks her language and we will try to find someone.

Has that been much of a problem, covering all the languages?

No, we haven't had any trouble with that. Even if one of our six counsellors doesn't speak that language, we can find it among our membership. We will ask one of our members to come in and work alongside one of our counsellors to help get this woman through her crisis.

So this way you are drawing the community into the work and taking advantage of the range of backgrounds.

Exactly. We are very much a community-based group, we are very involved with the affairs of the Indian community. We are part of it; our lives are also nested within the community so that's how we work.

Are the women mostly in

emergency situations when they come to you?

Yes, we've mostly been concentrating on crisis, where the woman is in definite need of some kind of help and we will work with her to get her over that hump. After that, if women ask for long term therapy, then we will refer them to an appropriate agency. We are not a long-term therapeutic organisation. Our short term counselling is very collaborative, very flexible. It's mainly sharing information and trying to work together with the woman on a strategy to get her life back on track.

When a women first comes to you for help, what is the general approach that you take?

Well, first of all, we listen. She needs to talk. Most of the time she's never talked about this problem to anyone for whatever number of years. If she is ready, we will meet with her over a cup of coffee and talk it over. So it always starts with just talking, and we take a family approach. A lot of times I become the *didi*, or aunty, or *behen* — whoever she wants me to be. We try to ask her: "What is it that you would like?" and most of them fear their children will be taken away and that they will be worse off if the marriage breaks up. What we try to do is to expose her to the options that are available, from the extreme of leaving her husband/boyfriend to even staying within the situation but having some legal recourses such as a restraining order. We work out the options together with her, though often it is a matter of a couple of months before she can even think about any of these options. Sometimes she will say I think I need to explore this a little bit more, so we will explore that particular channel with her and try to provide her with as much support

Sujata Warrier

as we can. Our work depends a lot on whatever she wants to do. A large majority of these women don't want to leave their husbands, they just want *us* to make him a better man, and we keep saying again and again: "We just don't have the power. We wish we did, but the truth is we can't make him stop doing anything, but *you* can look at the different options that are available." The only thing that we keep insisting is that you don't have to take the abuse. Think about it a little more, what is it doing to you, what is it doing to your children? And then go on from there. A lot of times if she just takes the step of calling the police once, it puts the fear of God in him. He may not change, but he may stop hitting her. Or if she says, I'm talking to Manavi or Manavi knows about this, a lot of men have been very afraid that it's going to go out into the community. They know who we are, so they are really embarrassed that we know and worried that we will leak this into the community.

"Confidentiality is important, otherwise the women would not talk to us. But it really ties our hands down. We can't develop community pressure against a known abuser, which could be very powerful."

So this becomes a powerful form of social pressure....

Exactly. I wish we could develop that a little bit more because I feel the community should be taking a more active role, saying: "No, you really can't do such things. This is not acceptable behaviour." But the US laws are kind of funny. We are supposed to keep everything so quiet for the sake of confidentiality. On the one hand, confidentiality is important, otherwise the women would not talk to us. But on the other hand, it really ties our hands down. So at times we can't develop community pressure against a known abuser, which could be very powerful.

We do put so much stress on confidentiality in the US, but I can see how within these smaller subcultures, the closeness of the community gives you a potential tool to work with that wouldn 't be effective at all in the mainstream communities, where you hardly know your neighbours.

Right. People are really aware of what the community thinks of them, their standing within the community. I think it could be **the** best deterrent, without turning to any legal recourses, which are in themselves difficult because the more we get into the legal issues, the more this stereotype of South Asian men is being perpetuated within the system. Many Americans believe that all South Asian men are horrible creatures who beat up their wives and rape women — essentially patriarchal animals. So we, and most of the other small organisations like us, are caught in this dilemma. Sometimes

it is necessary to turn to the law, but that doesn't always mean that we are happy with the law, since there are abuses within the legal system based on race or culture.

So do you use legal recourses only as a last resort?

No, actually it really depends on what the woman concerned wants. She may say that I *do* want to take him to court. One of the things that we decided early on, and that we keep reminding ourselves of, is that our emphasis is really the empowerment of women, which means that the decision-making power and the choices are up to the woman involved. We can't really dictate, because we really don't know what is best for her. There is no one way of working out solutions.

If you could somehow get around this confidentiality problem, what do you see as a way to initiate more community based intervention?

There's a wonderful woman working with us named Sujata Warrier. She and I often talk about this, that one of the things we would like to do is a lot more community organising around this issue, going out to cultural organisations within the community and saying: "You have to take a stand. Here is one of your members who is maltreating his wife. You have to do something about it. I don't care how you do it, even if it's just not inviting him to your homes anymore, but you need to let him know that this is not acceptable in our community."

However, this is something that we have not been able to do because of the laws. Or even to go to the place where the man works. Tell them: "You are supporting an abuser. You have to somehow take some responsibility for it." There are, for example, known abusers who are athletes or film heroes or something and these organisations hire them to do their advertisements. That is rewarding them by direct support. We need to say, "No, we will not buy your product if you hire known abusers." It is that kind of community pressure that says that your behaviour is unacceptable on every level, it's not a private affair, it's a community affair.

Our community has a definite ambivalence towards us, like: "Yes, they are necessary, but we wish they weren't here." Which is understandable because we embarrass the community.

Through **Manushi** I have read of instances of women's organisations or even a group from within a particular locality organising a *dharna* or a protest demonstration outside the house of a wife murderer or abuser and calling for the social boycott of that family. I think that is one of the things that we've always discussed, that at least in India you have that option of initiating local action through social ostracism. It would be wonderful if we could do something like that. We've even talked to a couple of lawyers and they said, "Oh, you'll get sued so fast. Don't even try doing anything like that, don't even think about it." We have gone to very large industries and said, "Look, your employee is doing this to his wife."

And how could you do this without any legal problems?

We just went to their personnel department without much hullabaloo. We could have been sued. But they just said, "We can't do anything about it." A lot of times we have threatened them that we will make a big hullabaloo and publicise the fact that this organisation is supporting a man who is starving his wife, but they knew their legal rights, so they just ignore us. But something that I have always wanted to do is to go to organisations and say to them: "How can you support this kind of behaviour? At least you should call him in and say, ' We know about this and we don't approve of it.'" Even that would be a big step, but they won't take that responsibility, they don't even want to hear it.

Have you also encountered hostility from the Indian community, being seen as homebreakers?

Yes, when we first started out. Because our group was directly addressing violence against women, especially violence within our homes in the community, everybodywas in complete denial that it was happening. We still hear this a lot: "It doesn't happen, you're making

Manavi members marching marching against racism

this up, such things never happen." Even now we hear a lot of people saying: "What are you talking about? If two people yell at each other, are you going to call that abuse?" Those kinds of things. So we've gone through our own heartaches and sadness because of the community's dismissive attitude. But we have survived for 10 years and we have survived *mainly* on community support. The community supports us financially, but unfortunately our community seems much more eager to build million dollar temples than to take care of its own members. Especially for issues like family violence, people do not find it glamorous enough to support such work. Our community has a definite ambivalence towards us, like: "Yes, they are necessary, but we wish they weren't here." Which is understandable because we embarrass the community. We are always bringing up unpleasant facts and drawing attention to unpleasant things about ourselves. So, in the beginning, when these big regional conferences took place, like the Bengali Conference or the Tamil Conference, they never had any women's issues discussed. But now, 10 years later, you see not just our presence, but many other women's organisations are represented. There is, now, at least one forum in these conferences that is dedicated to a discussion of women's issues, whatever that might be. So there is some kind of acknowledgment that Asian women have problems that need to be addressed too. And these organisations will call us if they hear of a woman who is suffering to ask us if we can do anything about it. And these are the people who have always denied, and some who will *still* deny our existence, but then there is that kind of support or, at least, utility that we seem to have.

When you have a woman who is having trouble with family members, do you ever bring the family in to have a discussion?

No, we don't do that. We just deal with the woman directly.

What do you do in a case where it is hard for you to figure out whether her version is reliable?

First generation immigrants do tend to call for outside help only as a last resort, when they are totally wiped out.

Well, we do understand that there may be some discrepancies in her version, but we are not here to sit in judgement on anybody. We are say ing very clearly that we will provide information and support for women and we stick to that. So if there is a problem, we will refer them to marriage counsellors, or family counsellors. We have a whole list of people who have worked with us. But we don't take that work on ourselves.

Do you ever have family members dropping in and saying: "Hey, you have to listen to my side of the story. "

Sure, and we will. We will provide them with the same help, whatever they need, offering them options. But we don't do any mediation work, mainly because we feel that it's not within our power to do so at this time.

Are you more likely to encounter abuse against South Asian women if they are recent immigrants?

Well, first generation immigrants do tend to call for outside help only as a last resort, when they are totally wiped out. The worst case that I can remember was of a woman who had been abased for 29 years. She was in

her late 50s, early 60s. It seems that with second generation women, they tend to call for help within a year or thereabout. Although in our group the main workload is domestic violence, we have defined ourselves as a group organising against all violence against women, which includes racial violence, job discrimination based on race, abandonment, and abuse by employers. It's a whole gamut of different kinds of abuse. We define violence as attitudes, conditions, and behaviours that perpetuate women's subordination in society.

Do the women that come to you in a crisis situation usually have their families with them in the US?

Some, not many, but some do. But most of them, or a large number anyway, have their families in India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh.

And does that keep them in a particularly vulnerable position?

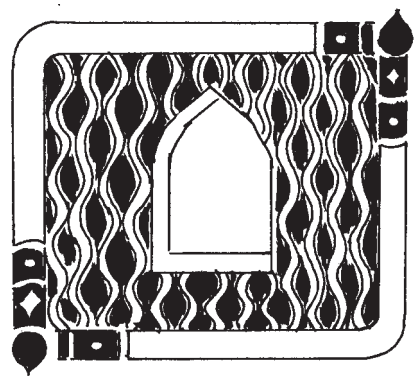
Yes, mainly because they can't communicate directly, or they visualise that something that they do will not be acceptable to the family. They will say: "I want this to stop, I want to get out of this marriage, but I can't, because what's going to happen to my family over there?" Sometimes the husband will actually threaten them, saying that he will retaliate against her family. Or she will say: "I have younger sisters who will never be able to get married if I leave him." So there are a whole bunch of those kinds of fears that influence women's decisions. Some are legitimate fears, and some are not, but because these women are so far away from home, they anticipate all these reactions. One case that I have personally worked with was that of a women who kept saying my parents

will die if I leave my husband. We said, "Well, you say your parents love you, why don't you talk to them? Maybe they won't like it and it might hurt them but talk to them, at least." And when she did finally communicate with them through a letter, they were shocked that they didn't know about it. They were the ones who supported her and said: "No, you should never stay with this." So much of the fear was something that she had imagined, she just assumed that they wouldn't support her. But it's a mixed bag, some parents would refuse to accept a woman leaving her husband. They keen saying: "No, don't do it, never do it, just stick it out. This is your God, stay with him no matter what."

What do you do in a situation where the woman is so isolated and dependent on whoever is abusing her, that she has very few alternatives?

What we try to do is to put her in touch with other women in similar situations, because Manavi's involvement can often lead to a more vulnerable situation for the woman if the abuser comes to know about it. When this happens it is extremely frustrating for us but there is not much we can do about it, since we only intervene at the woman's request. Often times the abuser's actions are so extreme it seems pathological, but interestingly enough, it's usually not. In almost every man who's abusive, you see a peculiar desire for obsessive control. It is often done by controlling her behaviour, restricting her mobility or who she associates with, but there are so many other ways to exercise control — such as controlling food intake, as in the case of Anuradha. Again and again we see this familiar pattern of the control of women by abusive men.

Our intervention may mean that worse things might happen to her, because she still has to live there at the mercy of whoever it is abusing her. So we have to be very, very careful about how we intervene, and to let the woman know that these are the risks that she's taking if she asks us to intervene.



In almost every man who's abusive, you see a peculiar desire for obsessive control.

You were mentioning the lack of extended family support for many of these immigrant women. How have the changes in the extended family, after immigration, affected the women you work with? What have they lost or gained?

The gain, of course, is that although an extended family can be a source of power, it can also be a major source of oppression. Family is where our support lies, but it is also very oppressive to have at least 10 different people telling you what to do, and constantly keeping an eye on how you are doing it... But the isolation of immigrant women when they get to the US is a greater drawback. They are sometimes completely cut off from all sources of support. One thing that is extremely problematic for immigrant women is that there is no escape from an abusive situation. Whether they decide to leave the man, or decide to stay there, there is often no family there who they can go to and spend some time with. There are shelters, but a lot of women are not willing to go to a shelter. Often they are too embarrassed to go to a friend's house, or most of

Tahira's Story*

Many Indian and Bangladeshi embassy employees bring housekeepers from their native countries and end up abusing the women very badly. By under-compensating these women, they violate the US labour laws that assure a minimum wage to these women, as well as medical coverage and leaves. Most housekeepers rarely receive any kind of benefits, and they are often subject to inhumane treatment. Tahira was one such woman who worked in one of the embassy homes for 10-12 hours a day, was fed very little food, and was physically beaten as well. Her employers locked her in the basement without any access to the outside. She eventually ran out to one of the neighbour's homes, and asked for help. The neighbours called the police and she was taken to a shelter. She ended up getting asylum, because she claimed if she went back to her country she would be killed because her employers were from a family of powerful politicians. Manavi provided Tahira with counseling, supported her request for refuge in the USA, and assisted her with job placement. She has not fared well in the US due to various other problems, not the least of which is illiteracy. She had very little support, and was not in a position to return home. Manavi still keeps in touch with her, and provides her with work from time to time.

** Not her real name*

the friends are the husband's friends, and they may actually refuse her until the husband agrees. In the nuclear family there is often no escape, no safety valve when the tension is escalating in the family like a pressure cooker. It gets to the bursting point quickly, without any possibility of diffusing it earlier on. In a small nuclear family you are continuously interacting with the same person and you don't get much outside input, nor can you let off steam by talking to your mother or other relatives.

In India when there is a build up of tension between a conjugal couple, there are plenty of outlets to diffuse the situation. I have seen so many instances where a woman will say, "I'm going over to my mother's" or "I'm going to go spend some time with my *bua*, or my cousin..." even if it's just three days of separation. This can be done without drawing attention to the tensions between the couple, because there is a tradition of going and living with relatives, just because you want to see them and spend some time with them. Then you can talk with all of these people who are your advisers, elders, and friends and it's all within the family, so you can avoid losing face with the community.

What do you see as the internal problems or limitations within Manavi?

One of the main problems we face is that although Manavi members are a dedicated lot, they do not seem to devote enough time to its activities. Most of our volunteers have outside jobs, and help out at Manavi on the side, so it is quite a demand on them. As with most service organisations of our kind, it becomes a part-time activity for well-meaning people and the work load does not get shared equally. Much of the time we lack commitment and do not focus our energies. All other things in life are attended to first and only then do we give Manavi some time.

I also feel that the Indian dominance is a fundamental flaw in Manavi, since we are here to serve all South Asians. Manavi was founded by Indians and the majority of members and counsellors are of Indian origin. This makes Manavi psychologically more accessible to Indian women. Although we try to recruit women from other South Asian areas, we have not been that successful. I think this is the problem with almost all South Asian women's organisations in the US.

Do you believe that more real work can be done by breaking down into smaller groups that focus on specific communities?

Yes, I really believe in a decentralised approach, that we need to do what we can do for ourselves and our communities and let other people worry about themselves. We can always come together on particular issues where we can collaborate. Within a huge organisation there is such a set agenda, and people just don't want to move from their agenda. I especially hate it when an organisation ends up being bureaucratic. Manavi has tried very hard to remain sensitive and flexible. Let's not worry about how other people see us. Let's do our own work. But we also believe that there are certain issues that we could help resolve if we collaborated with others. I think it's really important to pull in all kinds of resources on particular issues, like Proposition 187, the Violence Against Women Act that was passed, the Marriage Fraud Act — sometimes it is so important to get larger numbers...because that will have more influence.

How has Manavi changed over the 10 years you've been around?

I find it more stable, of course, and in 10 years we've developed some expertise and also some confidence in our work. But one of the things that I'm really proud of is our freedom from a set agenda. We've really been able to avoid that, to move with the women who come and ask for help, to work with them. We are also more established in the sense that people know our name and the community is more accepting, they will ask us to come and give talks at many of their conferences. The very fact that we've been around for 10 years shows that we have been accepted. We could have been dead and gone. There are about 18 organisations for South Asian women now in the US that have cropped up and we are like a grandmother to many of them, because we have been around the longest. So they often call us and say, "Send us this..." With some of them we have very direct connections. Up until 1989-'90, we dealt with women from all over the US by phone, and our phone bill was horrendous. But now we can say: "If you're in New York, call Sakhi, if you're in California, call Narika, Maitree... We can put women in touch with their local organisations. You can look at it like a set of concentric circles, we have our work with South Asian women, then you have broader focused Asian groups, and then there are the larger community organisations. If a woman wants to relocate, it also becomes very helpful to put her in touch with one of these groups in the area where she's going. Everybody's working on these shoestring budgets, little money, lots of zeal... ❐

Write For Manushi

Our readers often write and ask if they can write for Manushi. We are happy to consider the writing of even those who have never written before.