

THE KILLING OF EVE



Neelam Chaturvedi a co-founder of Sakhi Kendra comforts Aradhana Rawat, 17, who wept while telling of her father raping her. Aradhana lives at the Sakhi Kendra home in Kanpur, India.

Photographs by Mary F. Calvert / The Washington Times

INDIA

From page A1

parents' home, a blank expression in her brown eyes. Her daughters mill about, trying to attract her attention.

Her father, Ramesh Chandra, is retired and cannot afford \$4,500 for the kind of physical therapy she will need to recover.

And despite widespread publicity, local police have not made any arrests.

Omnipresent violence

Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state with 166 million people, is one of the country's poorest and most-illiterate regions. Its largest city, Kanpur, is a fetid industrial metropolis of 2.6 million on the Ganges River, known for its leather tanneries, cotton mills and a military base. It has no public transportation, no middle class, no city garbage collection, no sidewalks and dismal air quality.

Even worse is the violence perpetuated on its women and unborn girls.

Neelam Chaturvedi was 16 when she first noticed the way women in her neighborhood were beaten by their husbands. Then she read that a woman had been gang-raped by four men — and the blame was placed on the victim. Miss Chaturvedi's father, a trade union organizer, encouraged her to organize a women's group and, in 1981, she founded Mahila Manch, or Platform for Women.

Later, she co-founded Sakhi Kendra, or Circle of Friends, and turned it into a charity that occupies a three-story building not far from the town garbage dump. Sixty to 70 women contact them every day with horror stories.

First, there are the baby girls who, simply because they are female, are put on piles of dry grass and burned. Or they are placed in bags and fatally stabbed.

Then, there are the acid attacks. If a woman refuses a man's advances, he may throw sulfuric acid in her face, disfiguring her and rendering the woman unfit for marriage. Women are defenseless against such attacks as criminal prosecution is rare.

"The father doesn't kill the man who rapes his daughter; instead, they dispose of her," said Dr. Veronica Jacob, a volunteer with Sakhi Kendra. "The thinking here is warped. Even if India has advanced far in technology, the mind-set has not changed."

Sakhi Kendra is sheltering one doe-eyed young woman, Aradhana Rawat, 17, whose father would tie her to a bed and sexually abuse her. At one point, he tried to slit her throat with a machete. Tears pour down her face as she clutches a blue scarf and tells her story through a translator.

"My father said, 'If you tell others about this, I'll make sure others do the same thing to you,'" she remembers. A brother finally brought her to Sakhi Kendra.

Other cases brought to Sakhi Kendra include a mother who was told she must not feed her fourth daughter. Then there is the woman whose husband poured hot coals on her abdomen after she bore a daughter. And a wife who was tortured with cigarette butts by her husband because she bore only girls. Summoned to the scene, local police only took a report.

The fact that it's the man,



An example of India's growing male-female gap. Good Shepherd School outside Lucknow has 133 boys and only 45 girls enrolled.

not the woman, who contributes the Y chromosome that determines the child's sex, has not caught on.

Sex selection

Dr. Mamta Vyas, a gynecologist and president of Sakhi Kendra, constantly gets asked by pregnant women to determine the sex of their children. She knows that if she lets on the child is a girl, the woman will likely abort if she can find the money.

"Here in Uttar Pradesh, they're not satisfied with one boy," she says. "They want more. There is no limit. A lady would produce eight or nine girls while trying for a male child."

But no more. Ultrasound machines, by which one can discern the child's genitals after 90 days, have vastly reduced the number of girls born in the state until there are just 916 girls born for 1,000 boys. According to Outlook, a New Delhi magazine, the ratio in the city of Kanpur is worse with just 869 girls.

But sometimes the sonogram images are wrong, Dr. Vyas adds, "and the technologists, if they are not sure, will say it's a female child so they can make money on it."

The girls who are born often end up in orphanages like that run by Mother Teresa's Missionary Sisters of Charity on the outskirts of the city. Of the 40 children there, 37 are girls and many are agonizingly small, their tiny bodies disturbingly still in wicker cribs, listless and unloved.

Will they be adopted? Dr. Vyas doubts it.

"In India, families want to pass on property to their own flesh and blood," she says.

Sakhi Kendra's work got some publicity in January 2006 when Outlook sent pregnant women to local clinics asking for illegal sonograms. The reporter found lines of women waiting for the service and all the radiologists booked solid.

Despite the mandatory government sign saying, "No sex determination tests taken," only one refused to provide the service.

"I am the only person in Kanpur who is not involved in such murders," Dr. Vikas Gupta said.

Network of activists

India's skewed sex ratios have created a network of activists across India who transcend religion and caste. They are, however, split on the question of abortion in general, which is free in government hospitals.

"We do not mind abortions. We do not think all abortions are bad. I think some abortions help women," said Roop Rekha Verma, founder of Saajhi Duniya, a women's rights group in the Uttar Pradesh capital of Lucknow. "But we think sex-selective abortion is a crime."



Pari Radha, 14, like many unwanted girls has lived at Kanpur-Hindu Orphanage since she was two or three months old.



Many girls who survive birth end up in orphanages like Mother Teresa's Missionary Sisters of Charity near Kanpur, India. Adoption is not likely because families want to pass property on to their "flesh and blood."

Prem Chowdhry, a New Delhi-based scholar who studies male-female relations in north India, said the same.

"Abortion is not considered immoral here," she told an American reporter. "That's your debate."

Elizabeth Bumiller, a reporter who 17 years ago penned the book "May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons," pointed out this commonly made distinction.

"Was it intellectually consistent to be in favor of a woman's right to abortion yet opposed to sex-selective abortion?" she wrote. "Some Indian feminists referred to sex-selective abortion as 'female feticide' which made me wonder

why they were not opposed to 'male feticide' as well."

Swami Agnivesh, a well-known New Delhi-based social activist and president of the World Council of Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement, opposes all abortion and places the blame for female feticide at the feet of his own faith.

"We in the religious world are most responsible," he says, seated in bright orange robes in his New Delhi office. "In all religions, women have been relegated to a second-class position."

"The Hindu religious establishment is completely rotted from within. It has moved away from the universal values of the Vedas and Upanishads

[scriptures]. The caste system is a total distortion of the Vedas."

"The goddess worship in his culture is powerless to stop the killing," he said.

"How come in India where Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, is worshipped the most, yet we are one of the poorest countries in the world?" he asks. "God smiles on the United States and Europe but not on us."

The worship of Saraswati, goddess of learning, has likewise been ineffective.

"We have the most illiterate people on the planet," he says. "The real worship is to respect the girl child. The false goddesses are worshipped, and the real goddesses are slaughtered."

The best-known activist against female feticide, Sabu George, 48, was raised as a Syrian Orthodox Catholic in the southern Indian state of Kerala. While studying for his master's degree at Johns Hopkins University's School of Public Health in Baltimore in the late 1980s, he investigated infanticide in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

Starting in the early 1990s, he noticed that girls were not getting killed after birth so much as not being allowed to be born at all, thanks to the sonogram machine.

He tirelessly travels the country energizing activists, unencumbered by family. He dresses simply and carries an omnipresent black knapsack with his laptop. "I only work," he says with a smile.

He counts doctors among his worst enemies.

"In the West, unethical doctors are targeted," he says. "Here, it is the opposite. We have the trappings of the West with none of the ethics or the

professionalism. In a feudal society like ours, there's no concept of the dignity of the worker."

One doctor he does admire is Puneet Bedi, a Sikh obstetrician who specializes in fetal medicine and high-risk pregnancy. Seated in a cafe outside Indraprastha Apollo Hospital in south New Delhi, Dr. Bedi says population-control groups in the West helped jump-start India's female feticides.

"Post World War II, the world had this concept of hyperbreeding in India," Dr. Bedi says. "Everyone felt there were too many people in Asia."

"If you saw the Malthusian projections from the 1950s, everyone thought India and China would take over the world. So it was birth control at any cost in India and China."

Several American foundations — he specifies MacArthur, Ford and Packard — sank money into Third World birth-control programs and predictably, India began its first family-planning program in 1952.

"But what they ran into was son preference," says Dr. Bedi. "Everyone had to have two sons in case one died. So the average family size remained at four or five children. The government was under pressure to do something."

The only way to control population was to somehow guarantee sons. By the 1970s, women could determine their child's sex through amniocentesis. Although India outlawed this at government hospitals in 1979, "the private clinics had discovered this gold mine," he said. Ultrasound machines became popularized in the mid-1980s.

"Feticide was invented, touted and sold by the medical profession, and it operates with the complete consent of all factors of our society," Dr. Bedi says. "Abortion has been sold as a patriotic duty. So, killing female babies was an extension of that."

"At least in Europe and North America, there's some guilt connected with an abortion. Here, there's not. We call them 'coffee-bar abortions'; she comes in for an abortion and relaxes at a coffee bar afterwards," he says, waving an arm toward young couples gathered at nearby tables.

"By the early 1990s, no one who didn't want a daughter needed to have one."



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Part 1: Missing girls: An estimated 10 million female fetuses have been aborted in the past two decades in a nation where sons are prized and daughters scorned.

Part 2: Hostage to dowries: Determining sex before birth—and aborting the fetus if it a girl—is a cheap alternative to raising a daughter.

Part 3: Corporate culpability: General Electric Corp. profits handsomely by selling ultrasound machines in India.

Part 4: Compliant doctors: It is illegal for physicians to tell parents the sex of a child before birth. But laws to protect female fetuses are rarely enforced.