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## **Challenging cultural discourses and beliefs that perpetuate Domestic Violence in South Asian communities: A discourse analysis<sup>1</sup>**

By Janki Shankar<sup>2</sup>, Gita Das<sup>3</sup>, Sabrina Atwal<sup>4</sup>

### **Abstract**

South Asians are one of the fastest growing immigrant communities in North America. Domestic violence (DV) in the South Asian community is at least as prevalent as it is in the general population, yet is massively underreported. Several reasons have been cited for the silence of South Asian immigrant women about DV. While some of these are financial, social and structural, there are others that arise from discourses specific to South Asian communities. The aim of this study was to examine the origins of these discourses using the framework of historical critical discourse analysis. This paper presents the results of this analysis and provides evidence that challenges the dominant discourses and beliefs that are commonly used by South Asian immigrant families to silence women. The findings have implications for health and well-being of South Asian women experiencing abuse and violence.

*Key words:* Domestic Violence; South Asian Community; Critical discourse analysis.

### **Introduction**

South Asians are one of the fastest growing immigrant communities in North America and form the second largest visible minority group (Tran, Kaddatz & Allard, 2005). Although homogenized as a single ethnic identity, in reality it comprises a very diverse population from distinct ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups who have varying ancestries, immigration histories and experiences (Tran, et al., 2005). South Asians include people from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, and more recently, Afghanistan (Abraham, 2000; Das Dasgupta, 2000). Despite their diversity they have some undeniable cultural commonalities such as the value that they attach to family interaction, the maintenance of social networks within their cultural groups and the preservation of ethnic customs, traditions and languages (Das Dasgupta, 2000, p. 173).

No large scale studies on the prevalence of domestic violence (DV) in South Asian communities have been conducted in Canada. However studies conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom and anecdotal evidence from Canadian women's organizations and media coverage of abuse related deaths in Canada suggest that domestic violence in the South Asian community is at least as prevalent as it is in the general population (Choksi, Desai, Adamali, 2010). An American study that covered 160 South Asian women participants (married

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or in long-term heterosexual relationships) in the Greater Boston area showed that 40.8% reported they had been physically and/or sexually abused by their current male partners in their lifetime; 36.9% reported having been victimized in the past year. Only 3.1% of the abused South Asian women in the study had ever obtained a restraining order against an abusive partner (Raj & Silverman, 2002). Clearly, domestic violence is a serious problem in immigrant South Asian communities, but it is massively underreported by the victims.

Several reasons have been cited for the under reporting of DV violence by South Asian women. These include financial dependence on spouse for a period of 3 years after migration to Canada (see Merali, 2006), poor English language skills, a lack of understanding of sponsorship procedures, lack of knowledge of rights, loss of supportive social networks due to migration and lack of knowledge about community resources (Das Dasgupta, 2000 ). Many of these reasons are common to immigrant women from visible minority communities who experience DV.

As Volpp (1996) clarifies, specific to the South Asian community is the 'model minority status' assigned by mainstream American society to this community. This status idealizes some minority groups over others because of certain perceived traits. South Asians are portrayed by mainstream media as law-abiding, hardworking, self-sufficient and enjoying happy family relationships. But this status has repercussions for South Asian women who experience domestic violence who find it embarrassing to ask for social services or police assistance and are unlikely to seek public assistance to deal with the abuse as revealing the abuse will destroy the myth.

Finally, some beliefs and practices specific to South Asian communities increase women's risk to DV and inhibit them from seeking help. A recent study conducted by the Indian Women's Cultural Association (2010) Edmonton, highlights some of these beliefs and practices based on focus group interviews with immigrant women from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan (Indian Women's Cultural Association, 2010). Some of these beliefs and practices include the following: Men are the providers and protectors of the family; boys have the responsibility to take care of their parents; a girl is a transient family member as she moves to her husband's family after marriage; a family is not complete without a son; a woman who does not give birth to son has no status and can be divorced; women must suffer in silence for the sake of the family; if a family breakdown occurs it is the mother who is to be blamed; girls must be socialized to sacrifice their autonomy and freedom for the husband and his family; spousal violence is something the woman must learn to live with and it eventually end with time; woman is the holder of the family honour or 'izzat'; a girl is a moral responsibility; if she is not a virgin at the time of her marriage it is shameful for her parents and she can be divorced by her husband; parents must regulate the sexuality of their daughters because their actions represent the family's honor; a girl can be killed if she does something that her family does not agree; women are men's property; the woman must have the permission of her husband and in laws to go out, work, study and socialize or even see a doctor.

These beliefs and practices have evolved from a number of inter-related discourses about gender roles that are closely held by many South Asian families despite changing social contexts. They include among others: a) Sons are more important than daughters, b) Man is the woman's protector, c) The ideal wife must obey her husband, be loyal, devoted and chaste, .d) Children must obey parents and be dutiful towards them at all times and e) woman's primary role is towards the family and household.

In the context of immigration and resettlement and in strongly patriarchal family environments, these discourses and the beliefs that have evolved often increase women's vulnerability to abuse and violence. They also give the impression to mainstream service

providers that there is cultural and religious sanction for these discourses and that domestic violence is a community problem. Consequently, South Asian victims of violence can experience 'double victimization', first by the violence perpetrated against them by their spouse and their family and second from Canadian mainstream service providers, who may fail to provide culturally appropriate supports and interventions that can empower these women and perpetuate the racialization of their cultures and religions as inferior, primitive and barbaric (Gill, 2004). This double victimization can have adverse consequences for women's physical and mental well-being and can lead depression, suicides and other forms of self-harm (Kallivayalil, 2010).

### **Aims of the current study**

We undertook a critical analysis of historical and ancient literature of South Asia, particularly the Indian sub-continent to examine the origins of these discourses, with a view to understanding SA women's attitudes towards dealing with DV, particularly the socio cultural barriers to help seeking. The specific aims of our historical analysis were to answer the following questions: How and at what points in history did these discourses emerge? What social and political conditions made such an emergence possible? What social practices did these discourses lead to? And what alternate discourses were suppressed at the time and why?

### **Methods**

For the purpose of the historical research we selected documentary sources of literature that contained discourses around South Asian women and their roles in society from ancient times to modern times. We examined historical and ancient literature such as the Vedas which are the oldest surviving documents of the region and provide a good description of the role of women during that period. We also reviewed texts and web based commentaries on the status and role of SA women through different periods in history. We concentrated on current India, Pakistan and Bangladesh as these regions shared similarities in culture and faith till the early Christian era (Das Dasgupta, 2000), before the introduction of Christianity and Islam in the region. We divided this long period into the pre Christian and post Christian era.

We critically examined the content and context of discourses contained in the literature and drew connections between language and the less transparent elements in social life, including the way that language works ideologically and is used to establish social processes and social relations including identity and relations of power and domination (Fairclough, 2001). The literature we reviewed provided valuable information on the discourses that shaped the beliefs and practices of people during these historical periods.

The tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provided us with the broad framework for conducting the analysis of historical literature (Fairclough, 2001). Discourse is a framework of thought, meaning and action (Thompson, 1998), 'which does not reflect knowledge, reality or truth but creates and maintains them' (Mullaly, 2010: 28). It can be 'identified through textual or verbal communication and can also be located in wider social structures' (Lupton, 1992: 145). Critical discourse analysis provides insight into the functioning of these discourses in their specific situated contexts by generating interpretive claims with regard to power effects of a discourse on groups of people without claims of generalizability to other contexts (Cheek, 1997). Lupton looks to CDA to answer questions such as: 'how do

individuals take up, negotiate or resist discourse and how is resistance generated and sustained? What are the constraints to taking up subject positions?’ (1995, p. 302). The use of critical discourse analysis in this study can help in understanding why women resist dominant discourses, how resistance to these discourses can be generated and how women can be helped to generate counter discourses.

Our analysis of the data was informed by feminist perspectives. The feminist perspective emphasizes gender as a key factor in determining the experiences of women in society and is concerned with gender, power relations, patriarchy and hegemony in society (Drudy & Lynch 1993). Using a feminist lens, we explored the literature to understand how discourses around gender roles and power relations between men and women came to be constructed at different points in history, the sociocultural, political and structural factors that influenced the construction of these discourses and the beliefs and practices related to gender relations that emerged as a result. It must be stated that for the purpose of this study we have confined our review to South Asian literature from the Indian subcontinent and have not drawn from Christian or Islamic texts.

## **Results**

We present the findings under thematic headings that characterize the content of the discourses during the different periods.

### **Pre Christian era: 500 BC to beginning of the Christian era.**

#### *The birth of a son is a great blessing*

Like many societies in the world, South Asian society is patriarchal. All patriarchal societies, including those of Greece and Rome valued the son more than the daughter. The son was considered a permanent asset for the family because he lived in his parents’ home, perpetuated the family name, cared for parents in their old age, unlike the daughter girl who moved into her husband’s home after marriage. The son was also valued more because he had the potential to fight, defend and protect the community and these were very important in early societies. In some ancient societies daughters were sometimes abandoned after birth or sometimes even killed (Westermarck, 1921).

The birth of the son in the South Asian community is considered a significant blessing and this belief prevails among many South Asian communities even today. The origins of this belief can be traced back to ancient times in SA history. Hymns from the Vedas (the oldest surviving literature of South Asia, which is more than 3000 years old (Frawley, 2010), provide evidence of the social, political and religious life of people in the region (Joshi, 1978). There are marriage hymns, charms and rituals to ensure the birth of sons in preference to daughters (Altekar, 1959, p. 3). Prayers were offered during the marriage ritual that the couple may be blessed with sons and grandsons. The son was preferred not only because he would support the parents in their old age and carry the family name but also because he alone could offer monthly oblations to ancestors residing in heaven (Altekar, p, 105). For this reason the practice of taking a second wife to beget a son was not uncommon in ancient times. A son could never abandon his mother even if she was socially ostracized. He had to give her more respect than the father (Altekar., p. 100). For all these reasons, women who gave birth to sons experienced an elevated status in SA society. This is the case even today in many South Asian communities.

#### *Daughter is the pride of the family*

Although there was a distinct preference for sons, there was (and there still is) generally no aversion towards daughters in South Asian society. In many South Asian well to do and middle class families, daughters are as well looked as sons till they are married and move to their husband's home. During the pre-Christian era scholarly daughters were considered a pride of the family (Altekar,: 4). Education was obligatory for both sons and daughters during much of the pre- Christian era. Therefore parents ensured that both sons and daughters received enough education so that sons could take up the responsibility as householders and the daughters could participate as equal partners with their husbands in the governance of the family and in the performance of religious sacraments which were given great importance during this period. Educated daughters also played an important part in the management of their parent's households (Altekar.:9). In keeping with these requirements, education in pre Christian era in South Asia included knowledge for conducting one's duties in keeping with their respective occupation (priests, rulers/warriors and traders), and the study of scriptures and religious sacraments.

In view of the high value placed on education both sons and daughters from the three castes (In the Vedas, which is the origin of many Eastern faiths, one's caste was not determined by birth but on acquiring the attributes of the caste (Varna) - thus movement between castes was possible- see Sanatana Dharma, 1903) received ceremonial initiation (upanayana) into study life from the age of eight. This initiation ceremony was followed by a period of discipline and study till the ages of 16-17. Men and women were considered ready for entry into the householder phase only if they had been properly trained during the period of studentship. In the absence of formal schools till 4 AD in SA, both sons and daughters underwent education under the guidance of the family elders or under scholars. Like men, women could leave home for undertaking specialized study, though this was more common only among the rich. Marriage was not compulsory for women up until the dawn of the Christian era and they could engage in long periods of study as 'Brahmavardhinis'(Madhavananda & Majumdar, 2008). This period witnessed many women scholars whose names have been passed down through history. They excelled in and competed with men in the mastery of the sacred texts, poetry, arts, philosophy, math, theology, spirituality. Many women also distinguished themselves in music and dance and many were teachers (Knapp, 2005). Megasthenes, a Greek ambassador who visited India around 500 B.C spoke of women trained in the arts of war and about a bodyguard of armed women who guarded the palace of Emperor Chandragupta (Londhe, 2008).

Women were allowed to choose their own partners in early South Asian society though parents could exert a great amount of control over their daughters in selecting a suitable husband. There is enough historical evidence suggesting that transgressions from acceptable behavior of the times, such as birth of illegitimate children, elopements were frequent but they were treated as severely as in later times. Divorce and widow remarriage were allowed in the pre Christian era, child marriages and forced self- immolation at the funeral pyre of the husband were rare (Madhavananda & Mazumdar, 1953, p. 12-15). Thus, in early South Asian society (2500-500 BC), although sons were preferred, and the society was largely patriarchal, daughters received equal education, had enough voice in the choice of partners, played an important role in their parent's house and participated freely in mixed social and public gatherings. By the time they married at the ages of 16/17 they had enough education and maturity to conjointly manage the household with their husband. Parents would undoubtedly have experienced anxiety that their daughters should have good husbands. However, their anxieties about protecting and controlling their daughters would be much less during this era as practices like dowry, and child marriage

were not prevalent, divorce and remarriage were allowed and there was tolerance for transgressions in the daughter's behaviors (Choudhiri, 1978, p. 37; Kapadia, 1966. p. 59).

In the following section, we present some excerpts from the ancient literature of South Asia that attests to the place of women in society and gender relations at the time. We draw from English translations of Sanskrit hymns from the Vedas, including the Mahabharata and the Manusmriti (Laws of Manu). Sanskrit was the language spoken by the ancients before local dialects appeared. Besides portraying the life of people at the time, the discourses contained within the hymns had a significant influence in shaping attitudes towards women till around 500 BC.

*Women are worthy of worship. They are the fate of the household, the lamp of enlightenment for all in the household. They bring solace to the family and are an integral part of dharmic life. Even heaven is under the control of women. The gods reside in those households where women are worshipped and in households where women are slighted all efforts at improvement go in vain. (Manusmriti, Laws of Manu, 3-56)*

*The sun god follows the first illuminated and enlightened goddess Usha (dawn) in the same manner as men emulate and follow women". (Atharva Veda Samhita, Part 2, Kanda 27, sukta 107, sloka 5705)*

*O ruler of the earth (Yuddhisthira) the lineage in which daughters and the daughters-in-law are saddened by ill treatment that lineage is destroyed. When out of their grief these women curse these households, such households lose their charm, prosperity and happiness." (Bhisma to Yudhisthra, emperor in Mahabharata, Anushashaparva, Chapter 12 verse 14.)*

The following refers to another aspect of the freedom that woman enjoyed in the Vedic period.

*"If a husband dies, a wife may marry another husband. If a husband deserts his wife, she may marry another." (Manusmriti, chapter IX, verse 77).*

That men and women were considered equal in the spiritual domain can be inferred from the following verse:

*O women! These mantras are given to you equally (as to men). May your thoughts, too, be harmonious. May your assemblies be open to all without discrimination. Your mind and consciousness should be harmonious. I (the rishi) give you these mantras equally as to men and give you all and equal powers to absorb (the full powers) of these mantras. (Rig Veda 10-191-3)*

*The ideal husband, the ideal wife*

The marriage rituals of early South Asians did not enjoin the duty of obedience upon the wife. The hymns elaborate in great detail about the nature of the marital relationship. The husband had to support and maintain the wife as his most sacred duty and above all he had to be

true to his vow of conjugal fidelity. Once married, he could never forsake her in his pursuit of pleasure, wealth and even to follow spiritual ideals. On her part, the wife was to be true and loyal to her husband, promote his happiness (Altekar, 1959, pp. 95-100). The following are two excerpts from the early literature that describe the husband wife relationship:

*The dearest friend, the essence of all kinship, the fulfillment of all desires, a veritable treasure, the very life itself – all these is a husband to his wife and vice versa. (Malatimadhava, Act V1, 18).*

*O bride! I accept your hand to enhance our joint good fortune. I pray to you to accept me as your husband and live with me until our old age” (Rigveda Samhita Part 4, sukta 85, sloka 9702)*

Thus, the relationship between husband and wife was expected to be based on equality, mutual respect, devotion and loyalty and the husband could not exert power and control over her. The literature also highlights that although monogamy was the accepted norm for most people, the practice of polygamy prevailed among the rich and the nobility. The average man could take a second wife if the first was not able to give him a son but even then he could not divorce or abandon his first wife- and had to maintain and support her. In the case of adultery, both men and women were blamed as passages in the Mahabharata highlight (Chapter 8, 58-5). Killing of women was considered a crime and the perpetrators received capital punishment (Manusmriti, 9, 232).

If civilization is to be judged by the status it accorded to its women, it can be said that this ancient civilization, was a highly developed one compared to other ancient ones of that time, because women were accorded their rightful place in society. Unfortunately, the status enjoyed by women during this era began to steadily decline from around 500 B.C, experienced a steep deterioration from the beginning of the Christian era that continued till mid 1900's. In the following section we discuss some key factors that triggered the steady decline in women's status in South Asian society.

### **Post Christian era- 1 AD- 1950s**

One of the key factors that led to the steady decline and deterioration in women's status was the increasing barriers to education they began experiencing towards the end of the pre Christian era. From about 500 B.C there was a declining interest among ordinary people to devote several years to study, particularly the Vedas. One of the reasons was the length of time required to complete education, which had become extensive and complex by this time with the addition of lengthy commentaries and subsidiary sciences that had developed by then (Altekar, 1959, p. 346). The local dialects had also changed considerably from the Sanskrit language in which education was imparted. In order to preserve the quality of education, the scholars of the time increased the length of time required to complete education and this called for several years beyond the acceptable marriageable age of 16 or 17. This led to a significant decrease in the number of scholars, especially among women, as few could pursue and complete their study before they got married.

Political instability caused by foreign invasions was another key factor. During the 500 year period, from 200 BC to 300 AD, the Northern parts of the undivided Indian subcontinent



was ravaged by fierce wars between local rulers and successive invaders from foreign lands, resulting in severe loss to life and prosperity of the people (Altekar, 1959, p. 350). The marriageable age for both men and women was lowered around this time. Girls could now be married by 14 or 15 (this underwent further reductions in successive centuries). Lowering the marriageable age affected women much more than men as it made it almost impossible for girls from ordinary families to attain any level of education. Unlike their male counterparts who were often able to continue their study after marriage, few women could aspire for this due to the responsibilities that come with marriage. This led a further decrease in the number of women scholars. By 200 AD, the ceremonial initiation of girls into formal study (Upanayana), which was considered so important in the earlier period, had become a mere formality and was soon withdrawn (Altekar. pp. 347-348). This dealt a severe blow to women's status in society. Parents were now more interested in seeking bridegrooms for their young daughters rather than ensuring that they were educated.

The final blow to women's status came when marriage was made compulsory for women by a rising oppressive patriarchy. By about 300 BC, the Indian sub-continent experienced the rise and spread of ascetic faiths such as Buddhism and Jainism, largely as a reaction to an oppressive hierarchical caste based social structure (headed by the priest caste) and ritualistic religious practices that had developed in the region by that time. These faiths that preached renunciation as a way to cope with life's struggles allowed women to enter ascetic life and devote their life to study, a choice that they had in the earlier era before 500 BC. Although women monks did not achieve the status of male monks (De Silva, 1988), entry into ascetic life provided the opportunity to extricate themselves from the oppressive patriarchal practices that now governed marital and household life.

However, women were entering ascetic life much against the wishes of their elders and were not available for marriage. In order to draw women back into marriage and household life, influential upper caste males of the time, made marriage compulsory for women from about 300 B.C (Altekar, p. 33). Parents were now anxious to get their daughters married even before they had attained puberty. When uneducated or marginally educated inexperienced young girls began to get married, they naturally had no voice in the choice of their husbands. Neither could they command any respect in their husband's home. They were forced to live under the power and control of their husband and often unsympathetic in-laws. Thus, women moved from the control and protection of their parents' home to that of their husband and his household.

The rise and spread of the ideals of asceticism from 500 BC had another impact on discourses about the women and their role in society. Ascetic schools both in the West and in South Asia painted women in dark colors. According to Socrates (469 BC-399 BC), "woman is the source of all evil". Tertullin (160 BC-225 AD), the father of Latin Christianity and Western theology, says, "woman is the gate of hell and the mother of all evils". In South Asia around the same time, ascetic schools preached that man could attain salvation only through renunciation of the world and that if he had to renounce the world he had to renounce the woman (Varahamihira's *Brhat Samhita*, 74, 5, translated by Bhat, 1996). In an attempt to dissuade men from marriage and family life (and thus gain more students), these schools painted women as the cause of all ills in society. It followed that since woman was the cause of man's spiritual downfall it was her responsibility to keep men from 'going astray' by controlling her sexuality. Influential writers and commentators of the time such as Kautilya (300B.C-400 BC) strongly advocated for controlling women's promiscuity through seclusion.

The following are excerpts from the same text (Manusmrithi) that also extolled women as goddesses, suggesting additions by anonymous authors, from subsequent periods in history when the status of women was in a state of decline:

*A father ought to protect a woman while she is a maiden, the husband when she is married and sons when the husband is no more. A woman ought never to remain independent (Manusmrithi, V, 147).*

*The father is to blame if he does not arrange for the daughter's marriage in proper time, the husband if he does not look after his wife properly and son if he does not protect his mother during her old age (Manusmrithi, 1, 85)*

*The woman must obey her father in childhood, the husband in youth and sons in old age (Manusmrithi V, 147)*

In another excerpt Manu comments on the nature of women's character:

*Women are by nature petty and narrow-minded, jealous and prone to anger and fickleness. (Manusmrithi. 1X, 17).*

The Manusmrithi contains verses about women that are often diametrically opposite in meaning, suggesting additions by anonymous authors, from subsequent periods in history. According to Dr. Dayanand Saraswati, a well-known 19<sup>th</sup> century campaigner for women's rights, verses from the Manusmrithi (Laws of Manu) that are highly critical of women and the lower castes are not Vedic at all and have been introduced not by the original Manu but by corrupt high caste male chauvinistic Brahmins (priest caste) in subsequent eras who wanted to legitimize the caste system. Dr. Surendra Kumar, another Vedic scholar says that of the total 2685 verses in the present Manusmrithi, only 1214 are authentic or can be confirmed by the Vedas.

*Men are superior and women must be under their control and protection*

With the lowering of the marriageable age and marriage becoming obligatory, the majority of women sank into illiteracy. The dwindling numbers of educated women had already generated myths as early as 300 BC that women were by nature backward and inferior to men mentally, intellectually and spiritually. The withdrawal of the women's right to the ceremonial initiation into study life at the age of 8 or 9, was now replaced by marriage (Altekar, p. 94). The husband, who was often older and more educated, was now her preceptor and teacher. In return the wife would serve him with devotion. This invariably exposed women to various forms of abuse. By about 800 AD it was rare to find educated women in South Asian society. Education was confined to women from wealthy and princely families who could afford to be educated privately and to dancing girls and prostitutes. Illiteracy, lack of voice and awareness about the freedom and status they had enjoyed in a previous era, prevented women from challenging the patriarchal discourses that were evolving about them. Men's superiority now extended to intellectual and spiritual domains and brought women totally under their control.

The ideal husband and wife relationship now applied only to women. The husband could wield absolute authority over his wife and because of her dependent status she had to obey and

be loyal to him. The earlier norm that the husband should always support and maintain his wife received scant regard and men started discarding their wives on flimsy grounds, even if she was loyal and devoted to him and had given birth to sons (Altekar, pp. 360-361). Ill treatment and desertion of wives was no longer punishable by law. These changed practices would undoubtedly affect the socialization of girls in average families who would be brought up from childhood to be obedient and uphold the values of loyalty, devotion, chastity and self-sacrifice. Beliefs that if women were given freedom, they would transgress the limits, led to restrictions on women's participation in public life.

*The ideal husband and wife relationship replaced by the 'Pativrata concept'.*

From about 8 AD to 1800 AD, further changes took place in South Asian society. Interest in the teachings of the ascetic faiths had begun to decline. By 8 AD, Buddhism had almost moved out of the Indian subcontinent having gained more followers outside. During this period, new forms of religious practices evolved and women became the main followers and custodians of these practices. Epics from the ancient scriptures were translated into vernacular languages and sermonized in villages across South Asia. Since most women during this period were uneducated, the translations of these epics were executed by men of the time who glorified the attributes of self-sacrifice, suffering, chastity, modesty, loyalty, obedience and devotion in epic wives while failing to glorify the strengths of these women – for example their courage, self-control, independence, education and wisdom. Women developed blind faith in these values to the detriment of rationality and many most likely accepted and internalized the role of the ideal wife (Pativrata) who is willing to serve her husband even if there was no reciprocity in his duties and sentiments towards her.

### **Further changes in South Asian society**

Islam was introduced into the Indian sub-continent in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> AD by invaders from West Asia who later became conquerors and increasing numbers of subjects in conquered lands joined this faith by force or free will. Practices of the 'veil' and forced immolation (Sutti) at the funeral pyre of the husband, which were alien to South Asian women until about 1000 AD (Altekar, 1959, p. 130), emerged during the latter part of this period. Despite Islam's teachings of equality between women and men, their conquerors and clergy did little to elevate the status of South Asian women, restore their rights and abolish the evil practices that had crept into South Asian society at the time.

The rise of Sikhism in the 15 century in the Punjab region of North India tried to revive the ancient Vedic philosophy of equality between man and woman in all spheres of life: educational, marital, social, cultural (Kaur, 2004). As in ancient times, it allowed women to lead religious congregations, take part in the recitation of scriptures and participate in all religious, cultural, social, and secular activities. But in course of time male hegemony and control started asserting itself among many of the followers of this revolutionary faith. The Christian missionary movement that started in the region from around the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD, was successful in drawing many converts especially from among the poor and tribal classes but did little to improve the rights of women. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and within a period of 2000 years of history, the average South Asian woman had reached the lowest ebb of her status in their society.

## Discussion

This historical research aimed to examine how and at what points in history oppressive discourses and beliefs emerged, the social and political conditions that made the emergence of these discourses possible, the practices these discourses led to and what alternate discourses were suppressed at the time. The purpose was to understand South Asian women's attitudes towards domestic violence.

Our findings establish that suppression of women's rights and their abuse by the current patriarchal norms of South Asian society have no religious or cultural basis. Although South Asian society, like many other societies globally, was and is patriarchal, the Vedas, which are the philosophical roots of many Eastern faiths and cultures such as Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism, provide ample evidence that current discourses, beliefs and practices about male superiority are neither part of the South Asian culture nor faiths. As discussed earlier, until about 500 B.C South Asian women were considered equal to men in mental, intellectual and spiritual domains, shared equal rights in the household, had the freedom to divorce, remarry, pursue education and careers and remain single if they wished. There was also no expectation that they should aspire to be 'Pativratas' (loyal, devoted and self-sacrificing wives) and practices such as the dowry and honor killing were rare. The current discourses about male superiority, and the beliefs and practices that increase women's vulnerability to abuse in the South Asian community evolved from an oppressive patriarchy that took hold of SA society from the end of the pre-Christian era.

Why did patriarchy become increasingly oppressive in subsequent eras? From a feminist perspective, our analysis suggests several intersecting social and environmental factors that were responsible for this. These include a rapidly changing sociopolitical climate, fears and insecurities about race extinction, loss of culture and tradition, barriers to education that women began to experience, the rapidly falling numbers of educated women in society and the corresponding increase in uneducated very young brides. These influenced the discourses and the language around women's role in society and led to the emergence of an oppressive patriarchy that had a disastrous and irrevocable impact on gender relations for the next 2000 years of South Asian history. This oppressive patriarchy, in its zeal to keep women reined in (presumably for their own good and that of society), ignored the practical implications of its discourses in the day to day lives of ordinary women and a plethora of patriarchal beliefs and practices emerged that degraded women and reduced them to the position being the property of the males. The oppressive patriarchy was fully supported by a powerful and rigid hierarchical societal structure that had become established in South Asian society by the beginning of the Christian era.

Alternate discourses did arise from time to time, as a challenge the dominant ones. For example, when the initiation ceremony for girls was withdrawn there was much opposition. Many families, especially from the princely and warrior castes, refused to accept the lowered marriageable age for girls and continued to educate their daughters in administration and the martial arts, partly because of fears that in the event of the death of their husbands, the women could take over some of their duties. However champions for these causes were in the minority and were effectively suppressed by influential upper castes. Similarly women's attempts to enter monastic life and continue their study were effectively nipped in the bud by making marriage obligatory (Altekar, 1959, pp. 433-55).

South Asian women in contemporary society are at crossroads. Since the mid 1900's, in many parts of South Asia, particularly India, women have been given equal access to education,

are allowed to marry late and even remain unmarried. The reform movements that started during the late 1800's and 1900's have borne some fruit and practices of self-immolation by women at the funeral pyres of their husbands (Sutti), dowry and child marriage have been made criminal offences punishable by law, in present day India. With increasing numbers now participating in higher education, many South Asian women are recovering their lost voice. The pace of these changes however has not been uniform across all regions of South Asia and its diverse communities. As in all historical periods, oppressive patriarchal family environments and discourses co-exist with liberal family environments that practice gender equality. While many South Asian families have taken up the newer discourses and are socializing their children in keeping with these, an equal number continue to hold on to oppressive patriarchal discourses, beliefs and practices, despite migration to western countries and exposure to more liberal views.

### **Implications for immigrant South Asian women**

The findings of this historical research add to the growing body of literature on why many South Asian women who experience domestic violence may not resist oppressive patriarchal discourses and refrain from seeking external help. First, some of these women have been raised in oppressive patriarchal family environments for generations and therefore do not see themselves as oppressed, a condition referred to by Mulally (2009) as internalized oppression. That women from such family environments, even if they are educated and employed, may accept oppressive patriarchal norms and not report abuse is supported by some previous findings (Kallivayalil, 2010; Ahmed, Riaz, Barata & Stewart, 2004). Others may believe that oppressive patriarchal discourses are part of their culture and faith and will therefore refrain from questioning them.

Second, strong patriarchal norms in South Asian families have also led to perpetuation of beliefs that domestic violence is a private matter that must be managed with the help of family elders or extended family members, who can impose restrictions on the perpetrators who often include not only the spouse but also the in laws including women. Many women who migrate, having left behind their family support networks, often have no trusted family members they can turn to for support and may be terrified of consequences such as ostracism from the community, separation from children and financial distress, if they talk about intimate partner violence or are seen accessing help. Many South Asians are socialized from childhood to believe that women are the protectors of the family honor (izzat) and may therefore refrain from talking about the abuse to protect this honor (Choudhary, 2001).

Third, many women who would have otherwise sought help in their own country of origin by approaching activist organizations that offer culturally appropriate interventions, refrain from seeking support from mainstream western service providers because their models of service delivery are alien to their upbringing and because of fears of being stereotyped as hailing from inferior primitive cultures (Jiwani, 2005). Finally, as suggested by our findings under conditions of extreme stress, in this case migration and resettlement, oppressive patriarchal relationships between spouses may become further pronounced, a conclusion that is supported by previous research (Bayne-Smith, 1996, McLeod & Shin, 1993). For all these reasons, dealing with abuse and violence is challenging for South Asian victims of domestic violence, their service providers and community members.

In view of the high prevalence of domestic violence in the South Asian community (Raj & Silverman, 2002), irrespective of whether or not it is reported, studies show a high incidence

of depression, suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder among abused South Asian women (Burr, 2002, Kallivayalil, 2010). Helping these women to seek timely help for the abuse and also develop resistance to oppressive discourses is therefore a matter of priority for the community and service providers. But this calls for a holistic approach that combines interventions at the individual and family level and action at the community level. While women experiencing abuse need culturally sensitive psychological and practical interventions to deal with the impact of abuse, including intergenerational abuse that some may have experienced, women will seek help only if they are convinced that help seeking will lead to an improvement in their situation. This is possible only when the entire community is mobilized through community action programs, in which influential community leaders, elders, religious heads, family matriarchs, school principals/teachers and service providers are involved.

There must be widespread understanding and acceptance in this diverse community irrespective of differences in ethnicity, faith, and levels of acculturation and among service providers that religion and culture do not sanction abuse and violence towards women. It is the progressive degradation of values and an oppressive patriarchy that has allowed violence and abuse to take place. Respected scholars in the community, both men and women, who are well versed in the philosophy of their own faith and cultures, can play a key role, along with those who have experienced abuse, in educating and mobilizing community members to resist oppressive patriarchal discourses and practices and generate alternate ones that are based gender equality and reciprocity. Women (and men) from these communities may also need help to see how dominant oppressive discourses promote ideologies and beliefs that serve the vested interests of patriarchy and power brokers in the community. With increasing numbers of women from immigrant families getting educated and taking up important careers in the community it is possible to at least increase the reporting rates and help seeking behaviors among South Asian women.

In conclusion, the broad perspective of critical discourse analysis permitted an exploration of the discourses that shaped the role and image of South Asian women during different periods in history. The findings challenge current dominant discourses, beliefs and practices about gender relations and male superiority that prevail in some South Asian communities. They highlight that South Asian faiths and culture advocate respect, equality and reciprocity in gender roles and relations and do not support abuse of women. The findings are in keeping with previous studies that it is an oppressive patriarchy that keeps many SA women from reporting and seeking help for domestic violence. In view of the high incidence of abuse among South Asian immigrant women, culturally sensitive interventions are urgently needed at the individual and family levels and action at the community level to help women to deal with the violence.

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