

Passion for researching issues of ethnicity, gender

By KALA DWARAKANATH

NEW YORK—Issues of ethnicity and gender have long been a passion for Margaret Abraham, associate professor and chairperson of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Hofstra University, Hempstead, Long Island. She is the author of a recently published book, "Speaking the Unspeakable: Marital Violence Among South Asian Immigrants in the United States" (Rutgers University Press). In the book, she records the experiences of 25 women who have been victims of violence at the hands of their husbands. She also examines the role of South Asian women's organizations in bringing about change at individual and at community levels.



Abraham does not stop researching and writing on the subject. She is a hands-on activist as well, offering her expertise to Sakhi, an organization working to help women of South Asian origin. She also acts as a consultant to lawyers in court cases involving abuse victims of South Asian origin.

She believes that domestic violence is a complex problem. "We must look at cultural and structural factors and how they impact on women's lives. Ethnicity, class, gender and immigration status have an impact on domestic violence," Abraham told *India Abroad*. Before the mid-1980s when organizations like Sakhi and Manavi came into being and began examining domestic violence from the perspective of ethnicity, Abraham noted, the focus was mainly on gender; researchers did not pay much attention to minority communities.

The stories told in the book, according to Abraham, reveal the strengths and vulnerability of women who face abuse. Their weaknesses stem from the financial and socialization difficulties they face as immigrants, and yet not all the women accept their fate meekly, Abraham said. In their own way, some women do fight back and resist the violence despite the constraints in their lives. "This actually dispels the myth that all South Asian women are docile," she said.

Abraham, 39, a native of Kerala, was born in Delhi. Barring a brief period at a boarding school in Kodaikanal when her parents were away in Teheran, Iran -- her father had accepted an assignment at Food and Agriculture Organization -- she



Margaret Abraham (Photo courtesy: W. P.S. Sidhu)

spent much of her life in Delhi. She received an undergraduate degree in sociology from Delhi University in 1982, and a master's degree, also in sociology, from the Delhi School of Economics in 1984. For her MA, she received an All India National Merit Scholarship. Her father, she remembered, died just before the news of the scholarship award reached her.

She came to the United States in 1984 to attend Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York, for her doctorate in sociology. She received a doctoral fellowship from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture in New York for her thesis on the migra-

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tion of Indian Jews to Israel and the issues of dual identities they face there. After completing her doctorate in 1989, she began teaching at Syracuse University. The following year, she joined Hofstra University as assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. It was around this time that she began her research on domestic violence issues. She was often invited to speak at South Asian organizations.

In 1996, she received her tenure at Hofstra and was named chairperson of the department this fall. She was also director of the Women's Studies Program at the university. She has served as a research consultant to the Columbia University Social Intervention Group Project, and is a board

member of the Asian and Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV/AIDS (APICHA).

The incidence of AIDS in the South Asian community deserves attention, according to her. Paying attention to the issue also breaks the "model minority" myth and helps illuminate some of the real problems affecting the community, she said. Among many other roles, she is also a national advisory board member for the National Evaluation of the Arrest Policies Program under the Violence Against Women Act projects of the National Institute for Law and Justice.

For her research on domestic violence, she received a Rockefeller Fellowship and grants from Hofstra. Last year, she was honored by Sakhi on the occasion of the organization's 10th anniversary in recognition of her research and volunteerism toward breaking the cycle of violence in South Asian families. She also received a Presidential Research Award from Hofstra in 1994 and again in 1998, as well as other fellowships.

"I came in as a researcher making a link between my research and my community. I see myself as an action-researcher trying to bridge activism and research to bring women's voices out into the open," she said about her dual role. She also teaches courses titled "Ethnicity and Minority Groups" and "The Sociology of Domestic Violence."

She went on to explain how racism and language and cultural barriers make the problem of abuse a more acute and complex one for immigrant women. She said: "In a court, how do you put things across when you are not familiar with the system?... You are vulnerable and you feel even more isolated and the support system does not exist. The abuser has no social accountability. Often, it is difficult to communicate cultural nuances to the court. It can be difficult to explain that when you come here you are only with this person whom you hardly know. For South Asians, marriage is not between two individuals; it's between the two families, which brings certain pressures." Many women, she added, also encounter a lack of awareness among court interpreters, a result of ethnic stereotyping.

Abraham is married to Pradeep Singh, who works as vice president for information technology at Goldman Sachs. The couple live in Malverne on Long Island, and have a son, Arun, 7, a second grader at Westbury Friends.

How does she juggle her multiple responsibilities as a professional, activist, teacher, wife and mother? She said: "It's the feeling that all these aspects are important to me that keeps me going."